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Rhetorical Agency And Survivance: American Indians In College Composition

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RHETORICAL AGENCY AND SURVIVANCE:
AMERICAN INDIANS IN COLLEGE COMPOSITION

by

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A Dissertation

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This dissertation, submitted by Rebecca Lynn Gardner in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done, and is hereby approved.

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Title: Rhetorical Agency and Survivance: American Indians in College
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Rebecca Lynn Gardner
April 25, 2012

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In Memory of
Ann Claire Kavanaugh
1955-2006

ABSTRACT

American Indian writers in college share many characteristics with their non-Indian peers in state university classrooms; however, they have a distinct cultural background related to rhetorical agency and language. Particularly for Indian students who grew up on reservations, the effects of official federal policies regarding the use of English for assimilation remain significant. However, in writing classes, we have an opportunity to reverse course and to specifically teach toward what Scott Lyons calls rhetorical sovereignty.

In this project, four American Indian college students demonstrate agency with writing. All four students grew up on federal Indian reservations (Standing Rock and White Earth), and at the time of this study, were enrolled in their first year of college at a state university. The students describe their interest in writing that is personal, relational, and reflective, and they also describe how they use such writing to create change in their lives. One student demonstrates considerable agency by writing what Gerald Vizenor calls a survivance narrative; she explains that she hates words because they are violent and used to brainwash, yet she likes using language when she can use her own words, in her own way.

The concept of multiple subjectivities in postmodern theory provides one way for students to increase their awareness of the power they already have with language. In addition, students can expand their ability to use writing as a means of agency by learning new rhetorical strategies. By studying American Indian and other rhetorical texts as engaged in dialog with each other, students can analyze how rhetors have addressed certain audiences for certain purposes, and assess the ways in which some audience

members have responded with rhetorical texts of their own. In particular, students can learn to construct what Malea Powell calls rhetorical alliances, which are relationships between writers who are communicating within interdependent communities. Finally, students who have an increased awareness of agency and expanded strategies for writing with agency will be able to write their own rhetorics of resistance on behalf of cultural sovereignty.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Exigency

If Indian peoples are to use the English language for sovereignty, they must be able to decide for themselves what they want from the language. So explains Scott Lyons in “Rhetorical Sovereignty: What Do American Indians Want From Writing?” Lyons’ article contributes to the critical literacy theory and pedagogy of Paulo Freire and others by discussing the role of literacy in the future of American Indians. When we, in composition and rhetoric, ask what American Indians want from writing, Lyons argues that it is incumbent on us to do more than listen to what Indians say in response. We also need to teach American Indian rhetoric in our classes, along with the rhetoric of other groups that are fighting for self-government and self-determination.

The purpose of this project is to work with Lyons’ question, “What do American Indians want from writing?” Four American Indian students participated in a study about their writing experiences.¹ Data collected through writing, interviews, and observation is positioned in this project in dialog with related conversations in composition and rhetoric. The students’ interests and experiences overlap and intersect with issues including subjectivity, agency, and pedagogical methods. Understanding something about what

¹ I use interchangeably the terms Indian, American Indian, Natives, and Indigenous Americans, taking my lead from Native scholars in rhetoric and composition. However, I note objections to those terms by Anderson and others, who use them even though the terms themselves “are problematic Western concepts” (Anderson 2).

these four students want from writing, we can more effectively plan our approach to teaching writing with rhetorical texts related to self-determination for Indians and others.

Indian writers have rarely had the opportunity to talk to their English teachers about what they want from writing. The history of writing education for American Indians is predominantly one of coercion. Teaching Natives to speak and write the English language was undertaken both by the government and by religious missionaries in order to assimilate Indians into white culture. As Lyons explains, the effects of this forced assimilation did not end with the closing of the boarding schools, or with the resurgence of Native culture and political power in the 1970s. He writes, “The effects of this history have created identity crises, feelings of inadequacy, bitterness towards schooling, marginalization, disempowerment, and...negative attitudes about the technology of alphabetic writing in English” (*Rhetorical* 255). Lyons sees hope for a “new Indian culture of letters,” but says it has been slow to take hold among American Indians. He explains that resistance to writing in English is still both common and powerful among the Ojibwe in Minnesota.

But part of this absence of a local culture of letters is also owing, I think, to a public Ojibwe subjectivity still distrustful of the technology of writing. To reclaim the technology—as public, traditional, and critical—may provide people with a new way of thinking about the possibility and permissibility of writing. School can do much in this regard, but so much depends upon how we present writing to students (*Rhetorical* 253).

In other words, change is possible, and it can happen in school, but our teaching methods are critical.

Change is a fundamental goal for those of us teaching critical literacy. Richard Fulkerson claims, in his review of the state of composition in 2005, that “critical/cultural studies” is the dominant theoretical approach to first year composition. While there isn’t uniform adoption of the approach, particularly at community colleges and smaller universities, critical/cultural studies is a common theoretical basis for composition programs. This suggests that many of us in the field embrace the idea that there should be a connection between what we teach and material change in the world.

Lyons says there hasn’t been enough change, in regard to American Indians. He writes that while much attention has been paid to American Indian literature, including fiction, poetry, and autobiography, this is not the same as literacy, to which very little scholarly attention has been given. In addition, though there has been some increase in scholarly attention to American Indians within composition and rhetoric, Lyons sees problems with some of what is published. “But some of this work hinders rhetorical sovereignty by presenting readers with Indian stereotypes, cultural appropriation, and a virtual absence of discourse on sovereignty and the status of Indian nations--that is, with a kind of rhetorical imperialism” (458). For example, Lyons cites George Kennedy’s *Comparative Rhetoric* as a case in point, explaining that even with Kennedy’s good intentions, he contributes to the notion of Indians as closer to animals than other people, in terms of linguistic development. Malea Powell agrees. She writes, “There is little work on American Indians being done in our discipline and much of it suffers from the burdens of a colonial mindset and a general lack of understanding about the diversity of American Indian cultures and histories on this continent” (“Rhetorical” 397).

Both scholars note one positive change, which is that more Native voices are

discussing writing, and more Native institutions are influencing the teaching of writing to Indians. This change is crucial to the sovereignty of Indian nations, which Lyons explains is “the guiding story in our pursuit of self-determination, the general strategy by which we aim to best recover our losses from the ravages of colonization: our lands, our languages, our cultures, our self-respect. For indigenous people everywhere, sovereignty is an ideal principle, the beacon by which we seek the paths to agency and power and community renewal” (449).

Lyons’ term *rhetorical sovereignty* is more specific, addressing the role of language in efforts toward and emerging from sovereignty. “Rhetorical sovereignty is the inherent right and ability of peoples to determine their own communicative needs and desires in this pursuit, to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse” (449-450). Further, “...rhetorical sovereignty requires above all the presence of an Indian voice, speaking or writing in an ongoing context of colonization and setting at least some of the terms of the debate” (462). I want to note two particular terms within this definition that are important to Lyons. First, his use of the term *peoples* is significant. Throughout his work, in this article and in other writing, Lyons emphasizes the needs and values of the group and says this is characteristic of Native American culture, of which he is a part. The group is the organizational structure through which needs, goals, and experiences are measured.

The second term that is important to Lyons is *public discourse*. Discussing how composition pedagogy might contribute to rhetorical sovereignty, Lyons says, “...[M]y hopes are pinned on classroom theories oriented toward the formation of publics” (465). He describes the work of Susan Wells, who draws on ideas from Habermas and imagines

college writing as a means of participating in the public sphere. Wells wants students to study intersections of public and academic discourses, and write texts that could participate in those discourses. Lyons would like to see composition classes structured to enable public discourse for the students.

To illustrate what Lyons means by public discourse, he describes two contemporary victories in the courts, and says these were won by Indians who knew how to participate effectively in public discourse. The victories include the April 1999 Supreme Court ruling in *Minnesota v. Mille Lacs Band*; this ruling upheld the 1837 Chippewa Treaty that guaranteed the Chippewa the right to hunt and fish on land they ceded to the U.S. government. The second was the decision by the federal Trademark Trial and Appeal Board to no longer recognize the Washington Redskins trademark. Lyons argues that these victories came from Indians' knowledge of how to use rhetoric, not just the ability to read and write. He asks, "Shouldn't the teaching of (American Indian) rhetoric be geared toward these kinds of outcomes? That's what I want from writing" (466).

It is possible that the four students in this study would agree with Lyons, and want the same things that he does. The students are Renee, Ben, Jeff, and Kyle.² All were born and raised on federal Indian reservations in the upper Midwest.³ At the time of the study, the students were in the first semester of their first year of college, having just graduated from high school.⁴ If I had asked the students directly, "What do you want from writing?," they might have told me that they wanted federal recognition of treaty rights to land and

² Students' names are pseudonyms. Please read Appendices D-G for biographical information about each student.

³ See Appendix C for descriptions of each reservation.

⁴ See Appendix A for a description of the context for this study.

water, and for the state of North Dakota to repeal the law mandating use of the Fighting Sioux logo at the University of North Dakota. But as Lyons would no doubt recognize, what Renee, Ben, Kyle, and Jeff want from writing might be a little different from what he wants, at least initially, and perhaps over the long run, too.⁵

In this project, I asked the four students to talk with me about their writing.⁶ They described their writing processes and what they use writing for, presenting a complex picture of how each of them currently experiences writing. In this introductory chapter, I explain the exigency for the study. In chapter two, I interpret the overall themes in what Renee, Ben, Kyle and Jeff said and did related to writing, and analyze them in relation to Lyons' concept of rhetorical sovereignty and issues in composition. In varying degrees and different ways, the students described their interests in writing as personal, relational, and reflective. As they describe it, personal writing begins with their ideas, experiences, observations or emotions. The relational theme refers to writing that enables the students to interact with another person. The last overall theme, reflection, refers to how students use writing to understand their experiences.

In chapter three, I work with material from Renee, Ben, Kyle and Jeff to explore the concept of agency, which is the conceptual link in the relationship between teaching and subsequent change in the world. Even though the postmodern notion of subjectivities has the potential to increase students' sites and opportunities for power, students are not always aware of their agency with language. However, students are most aware of their agency with language when using writing that is personal, relational, and reflective.

⁵ In chapter two, I will address the tension between Lyons' question about the group and applying the question to individuals.

⁶ See Appendix B for a description of methods.

In chapter four, Renee presents a fuller picture of the agency that is possible for her in writing that is personal, relational, and reflective. Renee wrote a survivance narrative in response to one of her class assignments. Gerald Vizenor explains that survivance narratives reject the status of victim and assert an active presence. Renee uses a writing opportunity in school to challenge and denounce the use of language to harm and control, and to claim her power to use writing in her own way. Renee's essay is a dramatic assertion of how this young Native woman can use the power of language for her own self-determination.

In chapter five, I describe a course in which Kyle, Ben, Jeff and Renee would learn to use writing that is personal, relational, and reflective as a bridge to writing that participates in public conversations about issues that are important to their communities. I argue that students can write texts capable of contributing to rhetorical sovereignty by identifying their positions in cultural conversations, and by using rhetorical models for engaging in written dialog. In addition, I recommend specific assignments, including one designed to help students understand multiple subjectivities as a source of power.

A Note on Methods

For the sake of presenting the results of this study as clearly as possible, information that would typically be found in a methods section is located in Appendices A-G. The reader will find there Appendix B: Methods, where I provide a full description of the structure of the study, as well as an explanation of why it is appropriate and useful for this project. I explain that this project is an instance of action research, and as such includes interaction between the researcher and participants for the purpose of improving classroom teaching. I also describe the methods I used for collecting and interpreting

students' texts.

In Appendix A: Context, I describe the institution and program in which I conducted the research. In that appendix, I also briefly describe the participants, and point the reader to specific appendices in which student information is located. I also describe my own context as a researcher.

Finally, as noted above, in Appendices D-G, the reader can learn more about Ben, Kyle, Jeff and Renee. I encourage readers to consult the appropriate appendix when encountering information about each student in the chapters of this project.

Conclusion

In the next chapter, I describe the themes that emerged from student data related to writing. As Renee, Ben, Kyle and Jeff describe their writing, and as they indicate in writing they did for class, there are three themes that are important to them. First, they want writing to be personal, meaning that they are most interested in writing that begins with their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Second, they are interested in writing that is relational, meaning the writing allows them to interact with or change their relationship with someone else. Finally, the third theme is that students want to do writing that is reflective, which allows them to think about and understand their experiences differently. Related to all of these themes, there are theoretical and pedagogical challenges and opportunities for us in composition and rhetoric. As we put these students' words into dialog with issues in the field, we will see what particular challenges and opportunities are revealed.

CHAPTER TWO

WRITING: PERSONAL, RELATIONAL, AND REFLECTIVE

When American Indians enroll in state universities and similar colleges, their presence signifies a commitment that they are making to themselves, their families, and their communities. For Natives from reservations, the choice to attend a non-tribal college is particularly significant because of the change in culture. Sometimes that is exactly what the students are looking for, and the changes are welcome. Yet, for many, classes are a site of struggle, and composition is usually one of the first locations for that struggle.

In his article, “Rhetorical Sovereignty: What do American Indians Want From Writing,” Scott Lyons argues that if Indian nations are to use the English language for sovereignty, they must be able to decide for themselves what they want from the language. “As the inherent right and ability of people to determine their own communicative needs and desires in the pursuit of self-determination, rhetorical sovereignty requires above all the presence of an Indian voice, speaking or writing in an ongoing context of colonization and setting at least some of the terms of the debate” (“Rhetorical” 462). He says it is incumbent upon us, in composition and rhetoric, to listen to what Indian peoples say they want from writing.

It is important to notice that Lyons asks his question about what American Indians as a group want from writing, and he discusses writing as it relates to the overall goal of sovereignty for Indian nations. In this chapter, I apply Lyons’ questions and concepts to

four American Indian students. Some might argue that what four students want from writing is only individual, and not related to self-determination for Indian peoples in general. It is certainly true that four individuals cannot speak for all American Indians, or even for the nations of which they are part. Yet the students are members of a large group for whom a need (self-determination) and a resource (rhetoric) have been identified. To some extent, the needs of groups and their individual members overlap.

Still, the specific interests of these four students do not necessarily reflect those of the group. That is to say, just because these students are Indian, that does not necessarily mean that what they want from writing will be related to sovereignty or to the use of rhetoric for sovereignty. In order to understand how the interests might be related, in this chapter I analyze what students say and do with writing to discover similarities and differences with the uses of rhetoric that Lyons describes. In particular, I look for ways in which students' writing interests might contribute to or detract from self-determination for the group. Where the interests are similar, I suggest how we can strengthen that connection. Where they conflict, I explore ways in which we can use students' current interests as a bridge to writing that is related to sovereignty.

Throughout the chapter, I explore this relationship within the context of the college writing class. Lyons' question was posed within composition studies (through publication in *College Composition and Communication*), and for him, part of the answer lies in pedagogy, including teaching with American Indian rhetorical texts. Thus, Lyons implies that compositionists and rhetoricians should join him in asking the question, "What do American Indians want from writing?" While many have worked with Lyons' question (see Powell for example), the relationship between the question itself and

composition studies has not yet been considered.

In composition and rhetoric, we debate the theoretical principles that inform our ideas about what students need to learn and why, and we discuss the complexities of pedagogy, or how we move from theory to actual learning. Our efforts are framed and informed by a genuine interest in and commitment to students. However, I am unfamiliar with any study in which compositionists have actually asked and reported students' answer to the question: What do you want from writing? Perhaps the question is inappropriate for our field. From the first composition classes at Harvard, composition has been about remedying a need identified by higher education. Faculty at Harvard despaired the weak writing evidenced by students, and mandated what is now a nearly universal requirement for Freshman English (see Connors and Murphy for more on the history of Composition). College composition has never been about what students want; it is a matter of what students need. Isn't it?

Current traditionalists think students need better syntax, grammar and punctuation in order to communicate more clearly. Rhetoricians think students need stronger persuasive skills in order to argue more effectively. Critical and cultural studies teachers think students need to analyze and critique uses of power in order to influence those uses. Academic writing proponents think students need to write scholarly prose that may require all the skills listed above, in order to succeed in higher education. Of course, these are gross over-simplifications. But who among these categories of compositionists devotes time to investigating what students want? Expressivists were most likely to address questions such as these, but their influence is less common in college writing classes today than in the 1970s.

As a result, Lyons' question is a radical one. Yet I think that most of us recognize the value of asking: What do Indians want from writing? We recognize that his question emerges from a critique of power. Indian writers have rarely had the opportunity to dialog with their English teachers, because Indian students have always learned English within a colonial context. Within this context they are compelled to master the language of their conquerors. Historically, they were compelled sometimes by force, while other times they were compelled by the fact that the most pressing needs of their tribes could be met in small part by using the conquerors' language. Today, although the physical constraints may not be the same, i.e. no one is kidnapped and dragged off to boarding school, the needs continue to press on the tribes from every direction, from both within and without. Many, if not most, of the tribes still suffer high rates of poverty, unemployment, and health crises of all kinds. Their needs for resources and opportunities remain high, so strategic use of the English language to accomplish individual and tribal goals remains as critical as ever.

Our first impulse might be to ask how we can respond to those needs. How can those of us who are non-Indians teaching in public universities help Natives with their needs in regard to English? Well, Vine Deloria writes in "The Perpetual Education Report" that Indians actually have had enough of our help. His inclusion of this 1994 essay in his book, *Power and Place: Indian Education in America*, published in 2001 with Daniel Wildcat, suggests to me that Deloria remains skeptical of non-Indians' assessment of Indians' needs.⁷

⁷ Wildcat is Muscogee from Oklahoma, and Deloria is Lakota, from Standing Rock Sioux Reservation. The authors write about American Indian culture, rather than the culture of a particular tribe or region.

In authorizing the report the secretary of education is following an age-old and revered tradition in Indian education: It is better to talk about education than to educate. The ink will hardly be dry on this report before another organization, or another federal agency, has the urge to investigate, and the cycle will begin again. From the Reverend Jedidiah Morse in the 1820s through Senator Kennedy to the present, the refrain is the same: “We are not doing anything, we need more money, and Indians need to be involved.” Why is it that, in spite of sincerity oozing from every pore in their bodies, investigators of Indian education reach the same dull, stifling, and uncreative solutions? ... The thing that has always been missing in Indian education, and is still missing today, is Indians (151-52).

In other words, Indigenous peoples need to control their own education. Although there are plenty of conflicts between American Indians about how to define and meet the needs of their nations, they want to be directing their own solutions. And if non-Indians are going to respect that, then our one choice is to step back, ask what they want, and then listen. When we have heard what American Indians want to tell us, then we can take a turn in the dialog and talk about how what we have heard intersects with what we need to do in our writing classes.

So far, so good, for most of us. We understand that we need to share power with those who have been colonized, if we are to avoid re-enacting the scene of domination. But, to whom should we be listening? When American Indians enroll in our state university classes, whose words about Indian education should influence our teaching? Tribal elders and tribal college administrators have told me that students need to learn

grammar and punctuation, so they can get good jobs. Scott Lyons says students need to study American Indian rhetoric, so they can work toward sovereignty. Malea Powell, too, wants students to study American Indian rhetoric, to learn to use language for advocacy within ongoing interdependent relationships. Other American Indians join the conversation, such as Resa Crane Bizzaro, Joyce Rain Anderson, Angela Haas, Rose Gubele, Qwo-li Driskill, Lisa King, Kimberli Lee, and others. The number of Native voices influencing academia is growing, and I hope Lyons sees some reason for celebration on the “C & R Ranch.”

But these voices cannot tell us everything we need to hear. I also want to know what Indian students have to say. They have their own “communicative needs and desires,” and they want to be able to make choices about the forms and language they use in writing. What is it that Renee, Kyle, Jeff and Ben want from writing? One reason I want to know is that they are the American Indians in my immediate, local and specific sphere of influence. If I can modify my curriculum in some way that increases their success as rhetors, I am interested in that possibility. True, I can already make some modifications by listening to the other communicators available to me, such as Haas and Gubele, but my chances of success in teaching toward self-determination for the group are greater if I also listen to the students sitting across from me.

These four students are all young, fresh out of high school, with influences and aspirations that are inevitably different from those of the other communicators mentioned so far. Yes, the students share cultural ties with tribal elders and Indigenous scholars, but there are also significant differences among them. Such differences include age and generation, geography, family histories, and education, to name just a few of the

innumerable factors that would shape the students' subjectivities, and therefore the perspectives that would influence what Ben, Jeff, Kyle and Renee want from writing. These are some of the reasons that I want students' words to be counted among those we listen to when we plan their writing classes.

Of course there are variations among the students, and what emerged as important for one person was sometimes insignificant for another. The shared identity of American Indian did not create uniform responses, desires, or experiences. Similarly, anything that I can observe about most or all of these students might also be true of non-Indian students in the class. Yet I maintain that what these students tell us about writing is significant because they are American Indians who were born and raised on federal reservations. Their writing experiences today are undeniably shaped by the trail of broken treaties and English-for-assimilation policies of the past. These four students grew up within a cultural context in which writing in English had specifically been used to either control or obliterate communal ties and traditions of thought. Their grandparents and great-grandparents, if not their parents, were affected in some way by the federal boarding schools, either by attending or not, where they may have had both good and bad experiences. While we can't trace the specific influence of this cultural heritage on their current writing interests, we know it has shaped the milieu in which these four students have lived and learned.

Not only do Kyle, Renee, Jeff and Ben share a cultural background, but they also share some elements of a common future. These young people are college students, capable of leadership positions within tribal government, education, or business. Three of the four said they expect to return to their home reservations and live the rest of their

lives there. In the end, while we cannot know which details of this study reflect their heritage, or hint at their futures, we can listen to their words to understand how these four, at least, are currently combining the multiple influences in their lives related to writing.

While Kyle, Jeff, Ben and Renee are no longer enrolled in my writing classes, researchers and readers can evaluate future classes for conditions similar to those in this project. I teach in a university that is close to an Indian Reservation, and that has a small but visible Native student population. Having learned what I have about writing for Kyle, Jeff, Ben, and Renee, I can modify the ways in which I teach, such as I describe in chapter five. In addition, readers of this project can also examine their own teaching conditions to determine whether the information here can help them understand some part of their own experience, or make changes in their pedagogy. Thus, asking what the four students want from writing has implications for teaching beyond these four students, over time and in other classrooms.

While I use Scott Lyons' question and discussion of rhetorical sovereignty as a frame for this chapter, I use Paulo Freire's theory of dialogical education as the foundation from which I proceed.

Freire and Dialogical Education

Paulo Freire teaches that when literacy learning is rooted in themes important to the students, then language can be used for freedom. In his work with the poor and illiterate in Brazil, Freire used generative themes as a means of engaging in dialog rather than "depositing" information without regard for need and context.⁸ The dialogical goal of generative themes is relevant to both Lyons' question about American Indians and this

⁸ Freire is often listed as one of the early founders/practitioners of action research. See, for example, Brydon-Miller and also Kemmis.

study.

Briefly, Freire and his teams of literacy workers captured scenes of everyday life, using drawings and photographs, and then asked the people to talk about the images. The students' comments about the pictures reflected their experiences, and were different from what an outsider might have said about those images. For example, students in Santiago were shown an image including one drunken man walking down a street, and three young men talking nearby (99). The students sympathized with the drunken man, saying he had probably worked long hours for low wages, and criticized the talkers as lazy. An outsider might have seen that image and completely missed the theme of community members' need for a labor union. Students who are given a chance to generate themes and content for course material will develop literacy more relevant to their needs, instead of literacy that reflects the viewpoint and interests of outsiders.

Thus, Freire's liberation pedagogy begins with students explaining what is important to them while educators listen. Respect is paid in the form of a dialog between teachers and students, with the communities' needs, goals and ideas at the center of the conversation. Freire explains that we cannot begin education for empowerment by foregrounding our own agenda.

We must never merely discourse on the present situation, must never provide the people with programs which have little or nothing to do with their own preoccupations, doubts, hopes, and fears.... It is not our role to speak to the people about our own view of the world, nor to attempt to impose that view on them, but rather to dialogue with the people about their view and ours. ... Educational and political action which is not critically aware of this situation runs

the risk either of “banking” or of preaching in the desert (77).

Educators need to go first to the community to find out what is important to the students we hope to educate. If we neglect this step, we risk either indoctrination or failure to engage students at all.

Critical theorist Henry Giroux agrees with Freire. In *Theory and Resistance in Education*, Giroux says that literacy should be “... grounded in a view of human knowledge and social practice that recognizes the importance of using the cultural capital of the oppressed to authenticate the voices and modes of knowing they use to negotiate with the dominant society. What is at stake here is the goal of giving working-class students and adults the tools they need to reclaim their own lives, histories, and voices” (227). According to Giroux, this is possible within literacy instruction based in “reproductive ideology,” in which students learn to analyze how power is reproduced within social systems. We will consider reproductive ideology as described by Giroux later in this chapter; for now, I want to remain focused on the idea that education for freedom requires us to engage in dialog.

If we are teaching for freedom, we cannot impose our own ideas and goals on our students. Instead, we need to discover our students’ ideas, needs and goals. Otherwise, we replicate the dynamics of oppression in which someone else is telling students what they must think, what they must do, and how they must live. In Freire’s words, “When people are already dehumanized, due to the oppression they suffer, the process of their liberation must not employ the methods of dehumanization” (49). But are our students dehumanized?

Many will point out that American university students are a very different

population than the one Freire is writing about. Brazil is a developing country, and at the time of Freire's writing was probably considered "third world." The people he taught often lacked the most basic literacy. In contrast, the students in our classrooms will have attained far more literacy than those Freire is describing. Our students are markedly different from the poor in Brazil. But does that make the principle of dialog wrong for us in America? Giroux doesn't think so, and neither do I.

Particularly in the case of our American Indian students, Freire's dialogic principles are relevant. The history of writing education for American Indians is predominantly one of coercion. Teaching Natives to speak and write the English language was undertaken both by the government and by religious missionaries in order to assimilate Indians into white culture. This history sounds much like Freire's banking concept of education, which he describes as antialogical.

The theory of antialogical action has one last fundamental characteristic: cultural invasion, which like divisive tactics and manipulation also serves the ends of conquest. In this phenomenon, the invaders penetrate the cultural context of another group, in disrespect of the latter's potentialities; they impose their own view of the world upon those they invade and inhibit the creativity of the invaded by curbing their expression (133).

Freire's use of the term *expression* does not refer to catharsis or revelation of some inner truth, as the term has been used by some (see Elbow, for example). Instead, Freire is interested in students identifying for themselves what they think and what they value. He wants the students' portion of the dialog to originate in their experiences and observations. When students only respond to the teacher's words, not with words and

topics of their own, they are not engaging in true dialog. And when teachers are not engaging in dialog with students, they are employing the banking concept of education.

The history of American Indian education in English has been antidialogical, in the interests of conquest and colonization. The effects of this forced assimilation did not end with the closing of the boarding schools, or with the resurgence of Native culture and political power in the 1970s. Lyons explains, “The effects of this history have created identity crises, feelings of inadequacy, bitterness towards schooling, marginalization, disempowerment, and...negative attitudes about the technology of alphabetic writing in English” (255). Neither Lyons nor I would say that Native students in our classes are just like Freire’s students in Brazil. However, Native students in our classes are living with colonialism now. If we do not wish to further the assimilation efforts begun by earlier Americans, one thing we can do is engage in dialog with Native students about writing.

As we can see, Freire’s education for freedom requires dialog, beginning with us in the role of asking questions and listening. It is important to note, however, that Freire expects the educator to be an active participant in the dialog. Listening alone might be kind, but it is not educational. As I will discuss later in this chapter, listening without meaningful response might allow catharsis for the student, an affirmation perhaps of how she sees and moves in the world, but it would neglect opportunities for education. In other words, it would be foolish to think that students’ perceptions are always the only way to perceive. Giroux explains, “...[W]hile it is indisputable that experience may provide us with knowledge, it is also indisputable that knowledge may distort rather than illuminate the nature of social reality” (21). Personal experience is relevant and important, but it is not enough in education. A student’s monologue would preclude indoctrination,

but would also prohibit the exchange of knowledge that is fundamental to learning—for both the teacher and the student. As we come to understand the ways in which Ben, Jeff, Kyle and Renee think of writing as personal, relational, and reflective, we will consider how their ideas and experiences interact with our goals and commitments for the college writing classroom.

Three themes for Student Writing

Student writing and interview comments reveal three related themes in writing-related interests, including writing that is personal, relational, and reflective. For Ben, Kyle, Jeff and Renee, personal writing includes topics and content that originate in or are otherwise relevant to the students' lives.⁹ Relational writing communicates something about the student to another person, enables a particular social role, or changes the relationship between the student and someone else. Reflective writing is a way for students to make their thoughts and feelings into an object, get some distance, and consider that object within a wider context; sometimes it also presents an opportunity later for students to evaluate their progress in life. At times, one of these three themes will appear on its own, but often two or more themes are present in what students say and do with writing.

To some readers, any emphasis on the personal as it relates to Indian students may seem counter-intuitive, because the community as a whole is extremely important in most Indigenous cultures. However, Deloria and Wildcat state that the individual is significant within an interdependent community. They explain that American Indian culture values both individual experience and reflection, within the context of community. One

⁹ This definition of “personal” is particularly important because it is distinct from how the term is often used in relation to writing.

additional, inseparable value is the geographically specific place, strongly associated with knowledge. Deloria offers an equation for helping us think about this combination of values.

Power and place produce personality. This equation simply means that the universe is alive, but it also contains within it the very important suggestion that the universe is personal and, therefore, must be approached in a personal manner. And this insight holds true because Indians are interested in the particular, which of necessity must be personal and incapable of expansion and projection to hold true universally (23).

It is important to note that comments from Deloria and Wildcat about the personal are often followed closely by statements about how the personal is fundamentally interdependent with other beings, both human and non-human. Moreover, the relationships involve responsibility. Deloria says, “The acknowledgement that power and place produce personality means not only that the natural world is personal but that its perceived relationships are always ethical” (27). In other words, the personal does not refer to the individual in isolation; instead, the personal is situated within a mutually reliant community. For Ben, Renee, Kyle and Jeff, the interest in the personal is accompanied by the relational and the reflective.

It is important to remember that “personal” for these students means something different from the category “personal writing,” which has a difficult history in the field of composition. When it’s taken to mean the genre of the personal narrative essay, it plays a small role in most mandated college writing classes. Depending on the combination of departmental and institutional expectations, as well as our own ideological commitments,

most of us are working toward as many objectives as we can manage in one short semester. We have professional obligations to teach students to manipulate the languages of power so they can obtain employment and argue for their viewpoints in the civic arena, for example. Some of us also have concerns about personal writing: given how it has been used in the past to discover an “authentic” voice, we want to avoid reinforcing false ideas about a unified self. We also want to avoid either being voyeurs of students’ personal pain or demanding a trauma narrative in exchange for a grade. But in this project, the personal theme is characterized by writing in which students are the source for their writing. The personal is just as likely to include students thoughts and observations as it is to include emotional content. So while the personal theme in this project and “personal writing” in composition are related, they are not the same.

To further complicate matters, social constructionists will recognize that the personal is not simply a matter of what is specific to an individual. Instead, what Kyle, Jeff, Ben and Renee each experience in their lives is shaped by their age, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, geographic location, citizenship, and other factors. Further, what any of the students experience in a certain place on a particular day might be unique, but their interpretations of those experiences are not unique. Thus, the personal topics and content that are interesting to students are also social, even if the students are unaware of their own social construction. In chapter five, I will describe some of the ways that students could begin to recognize the interaction between the experiences that feel quite personal but are actually constructed by the larger society.

Finally, it is important to notice the distinction between students’ interest in the personal and Lyons’ hopes for pedagogy oriented to public discourse. While Lyons’

wants to teach toward the use of rhetoric in arenas of power, such as legal discourse in the courts, students in this study are interested in writing that is relevant to their immediate lives. These appear to be completely separate interests. However, I believe it is possible to address the desires we hear from Lyons (the Ojibwe with the PhD) and from the students (Lakota and Ojibwe 18-year-olds). In fact, I think students' interests in writing are resources we can use to teach them how to write their way into public conversations that are relevant to their nations. In chapter five, I will describe a course that would do this. Finally, while these are the themes that emerged from the words of these students, I do not claim that they are the only interests students have in writing. In fact, most of the students mentioned briefly that they are interested in persuasive writing, which is an extension of the relational value of writing they experience now. It is entirely possible that Kyle, Ben, Jeff and Renee would be interested in other kinds of writing. In fact, we can use what we learn about their sense of agency in the next two chapters to teach students how to effectively engage in the kind of writing or advocacy that Lyons describes. In the remainder of this chapter, however, we will look closely at the ways in which students' and Lyons' interests sometimes overlap, and other times seem at odds. In addition, we will notice the ways in which their interests are related to those of others in composition studies, as well.

Renee

In the first assignment for the writing class, I asked students to describe their experiences with writing so far, including what they were taught about writing, the circumstances in which they learned (e.g. when, where), and what types of writing they have done both in and out of school. Although the assignment required just two full pages,

Renee¹⁰ wrote three. In her paper, Renee indicates that she values writing as both personal and relational.

Writing has been with me most of my life but my most memorable writing would be, of course, when I first started to write papers, which was in 5th grade. My teacher wanted the class to start our own diaries of the field trips she took us to. She wanted us to be very personal and use every word we could think of to describe our emotions for everything. She might have been a little too deep for a 5th grade teacher I might add but it all was well worth it in the end because nothing is better than writing your own thoughts and feelings in your own words down on paper and hoping others will understand the way you do.

In this writing, which Renee identifies as personal, she wrote her thoughts and feelings in her own words. We can only speculate about the fifth grade teacher's intentions, but her emphasis on naming emotions suggests she may have been operating with expressivist goals. Expressivism is a pedagogy that has been used, with process methodology, to help the writer record some inner "truth."¹¹ That is, the teacher may have been hoping that students who paid attention to their emotions would learn more about the interior self, language, or both.

I think Lyons would say that expressive pedagogy does not lead to any increase in self-determination for Indian peoples. Instead of writing about emotions in detail, Lyons would want Renee to be learning how to dialog productively with other people through writing. Henry Giroux would probably identify the teaching Renee describes as the

¹⁰ Please read Appendix G for biographical information about Renee.

¹¹ Expressivism has been faulted for many shortcomings including solipsism, and this project will not critique or recount the history of the pedagogy except as necessary to distinguish between it and the theme of the personal in students' writing interests.

romantic version of interactionist pedagogy, which directs students toward personal fulfillment. He would reject this pedagogy because, while it counters the authoritarian and the instrumental, the romantic tradition does nothing to change the larger social structure within which the individual finds fulfillment or fails to become self-actualized. From my perspective, wherever an emphasis on the personal makes no attempt to connect the personal to larger social patterns and structures, a potential source of power is wasted. As I will explain throughout this project, I think personal writing can be a source of agency that teachers can direct toward larger social issues. In Renee's case, she does not identify any questions the fifth grade teacher may have asked that would have been related to power or even the larger society. Even at the fifth grade level, I would like to see students using personal writing, such as the diary Renee kept on a field trip, as a means to engage students with issues outside of themselves. As I see it, one of the functions of education is to help students construct an understanding of the broader context in which they experience their apparently individual lives. The writing Renee describes is not yet teaching her to do that.

It is interesting, though, that Renee identifies as closely with writing as she does. She offers a definition of writing in the writing history paper. She writes, "My inspiration for writing comes from my random thoughts and feelings. To me, writing would not be writing if it did not let us use our own personal ideas." For Renee, writing is a proper vehicle for thinking, and if her ideas are not part of her writing, then she would say some other process is at work. In fact, in chapter four the reader will see Renee make a more direct claim, comparing writing that is void of her ideas and words to brainwashing. Yet in her writing history, Renee has some positive things to say about writing. Notably, she

indicates her interest in having a reader who understands her words.

In her last sentence, Renee wrote, "...nothing is better than writing your own thoughts and feelings in your own words down on paper and hoping others will understand the way you do." Renee hopes for an audience. While personal writing is sometimes faulted for being solipsistic, this is an early indication that Renee is interested in the personal for how she can use it to connect with other people. So, even if she is recounting an expressivist experience of language learning, somewhere she also learned to value audience, i.e. the goal of communication with a reader. Renee's interest in writing for a reader makes me hopeful that she would be interested in engaging in the kind of discourse that Lyons describes. I think it is possible that she has a desire for public influence and participation in conversations about culture, but that she has not yet had much opportunity or experience with that kind of writing. Such a lack would go a long way in explaining why she didn't mention any writing interests related to public discourse. Whether or not Renee has had such opportunities, however, we can still observe her interest in communicating with a reader.

Notably, one of Renee's essays later in the semester seems at least partially designed to communicate with one specific reader—me, her teacher. Since I work closely with Renee's paper in chapter four, I will discuss it only briefly here, as it relates to the themes of writing as personal and relational. Essentially, Renee uses the "tool" of the English language to write a formal paper in an English class with which she tells me, her English teacher, that she rejects the use of words as a means of controlling and deceiving other people. In chapter four of this project, I will explain how Renee uses the words she hates for purposes of survivance, a concept from Gerald Vizenor. While Renee says in

this later paper that she hates words and wishes she did not have to use them, she also repeats the idea she expresses here in her writing history, that words are worthwhile when she chooses them, and uses them in her own way. In this later essay, Giroux might say that Renee comes a little closer to analyzing power, in the form of language. However, she remains primarily in the realm of the personal, though as the reader will see in chapter four, her critique has some power of its own.

The third theme, reflection, is also apparent in Renee's writing history paper. In the following paragraph, we can see that Renee wants to use writing to reflect on a relationship as well as on her experiences.

Sometimes I use writing as my getaway for just a second. This helps me pinpoint my flaws that come up too many times. I've definitely grown from writing elementary field trips to quoting Darwinism. The poems I wrote were somewhat personal in high school. A lot of it was me being very confused in the beginning of high school and very emotional at the end of high school. My most emotional poem was to my grandpa who passed away when I was 16 in 10th grade. He was my hero and inspiration. I always think of him when something goes wrong.

Both the relational and reflective aspects of writing are repeated here; Renee wrote a poem to her grandfather. This is different from other relational writing, because her grandfather was the subject rather than the audience for the poem. Yet Renee's words suggest that she was continuing the work of relationship, in a sense, with her memory of her grandfather. In writing this poem about her "hero and inspiration," she was apparently sorting through memories and emotions and probably figuring out a new way to think about her grandfather. We can also notice that Renee makes a connection

between emotion and writing, indicating that, at least in part, writing is cathartic for her, a way to deal with her emotions.

Lyons says that catharsis for American Indian writers is problematic because it is disconnected from action. We will work this issue closely in chapter three, using both Lyons and Gerald Vizenor to talk about the limits of catharsis as a response to tragedy, in particular. Because I recognize problems with catharsis, I focus in chapter three on the concept of agency, especially as it relates to Ben, Kyle and Jeff. In chapter four, we see Renee using writing for survivance, a clear expression of agency. Yet I want to note here that cathartic writing may have some value, sometimes. For Renee, writing the poem about her grandfather may have helped her deal with her grief, and enabled her to psychologically integrate the loss. I think catharsis is probably useful when it removes barriers to constructive action, and not useful when it enables a person to remain in a situation that is somehow problematic. In short, I don't imagine that Lyons would have any concerns about how Renee used writing to express her emotions in the poem about her grandfather, and neither do I.

In the paragraph in Renee's paper where she writes about her grandfather, we can also see how writing functions as a means of reflection for her. Renee explains that she writes to create a vantage point from which she can assess her own weaknesses. "Sometimes I use writing as my getaway for just a second. This helps me pinpoint my flaws that come up too many times." This statement reflects her sense that writing can be a means of self-discovery. As such, it may reveal more of that fifth grade teacher's possible expressivist influence. However, I don't see evidence here that Renee is necessarily operating with a romantic, unified sense of self, as an expressivist would.

Instead, we can understand her need for getting perspective as recognition of her own complexity; she implies that she is sometimes puzzled or confused, she gains perspective through writing on whatever she is puzzled about, and she recognizes “flaws.”

Whatever Renee sees as her flaws, she indicates that, rather than embrace them wholeheartedly as her rediscovered, true self, she learns: “I’ve definitely grown from writing....” Renee thinks that writing has helped her to develop as a person, and I think Wildcat would approve of the connection she makes. He writes, “And it is experience that shapes indigenous education and necessitates the awareness of self as crucial in order for knowledge to be attained. In American Indian metaphysics ... awareness of one's self is the beginning of learning...” (13). Indeed, at least for Renee, writing as reflection has meant change.

However, not all writing is equally valuable to Renee. She writes, “Some writing gets on my nerves though.”

I do not like doing biographies or other unimportant research. Research in general is useful for me but sometimes some things aren’t relevant at all. In 10th grade, my English teacher made us write about different topics of Othello. It was mainly the history of the Ottoman Empire and it was really interesting. But she also had us do research about something called V-day that came around Valentine’s Day. I guess it was some kind of learning process.

Of course, Renee indicates here what she does not want from writing: she does not want to write anything that is irrelevant and unimportant. Her example, “something called V-day that came around Valentine’s Day” is both specific and vague enough at the same time to convey the idea that the project was miserable enough to be memorable, but

sufficiently meaningless to forget why she had to do it. Unfortunately, academic writing is infamous among students for being a waste of time. And for many, one kind of writing in school is just like any other; if there is research and what they write is not a fictional story, then students are engaged in “some kind of learning process” that holds little significance for them. This scenario is a far cry from the active participation in public conversations that I would hope for, along with Lyons. What would make research relevant and important, for Renee? We can’t tell from Renee’s words in this paragraph, but we can read them alongside her earlier statements about writing in the same essay.

Renee says, “...writing would not be writing if it did not let us use our own personal ideas.” As we read that sentence again, alongside this new information about writing that does not include her, the word “ideas” seems significant. Renee isn’t necessarily saying that she wants everything she writes to be about herself, i.e. her emotions or flaws. She wants an intellectual connection; she wants her thinking to somehow be present in her writing. So when Renee indicates that the “personal” is important to her in writing, it doesn’t necessarily mean just the emotional details of her life. Instead, it means that she wants to be present in the writing that she does. She wants to be an active participant in constructing knowledge, not simply a reporter.

In this way, Renee’s desire for the personal might be satisfied in a constructivist classroom. For example, David Bartholomae’s description of “academic” writing in “Inventing the University” is writing that requires students to be personally present and involved in wrestling with content. Students working with texts and assignments in *Ways of Reading* have no opportunity to simply look up information and report it; they have to construct a position for themselves in relation to another writer.

Unfortunately, though, Renee does not seem to be creating much knowledge beyond her own experience. Or at least, it is not apparent in Renee's essays or interview statements that she is making connections between what is personal and what is social. I would like to see Renee make those connections by using personal writing, which she already values, instead of substituting writing assignments about larger social issues in place of all personal writing. In other words, I think pedagogy can use the personal as a stepping stone or bridge, to help students move from experiential knowledge to a more conceptual knowledge of the systems in which they experience their daily lives.

Giroux would argue that consideration of both the personal and the social are essential for critical pedagogy informed by "reproductive ideology." He explains that this ideology investigates "...how a social system reproduces itself and how certain forms of subjectivity get constituted within such a context," including the way in which class, gender and race are used to maintain power (223). Giroux explains the connection that he thinks can occur in a writing classroom between what Renee thinks of as personal and the larger social structures in which she has those experiences.

As part of this perspective, radical pedagogues will have to abandon the traditional leftist policy of treating the oppressed within the boundaries of a unitary discourse. They will have to insert the notion of the concrete back into a theory of radical pedagogy and take seriously the specific needs, problems, and concerns of everyday life. The point is, of course, to link the personal and the political so as to understand how power is reproduced, mediated, and resisted at the level of daily existence. Inherent in such an understanding are the theoretical elements of a cultural politics that establishes the preconditions for alternative public spheres (238).

Giroux argues for writing that participates in public conversations, which makes his position similar to Lyons. However, Giroux is saying that there are preconditions for writing effectively in these public spheres, and they are dependent on the inclusion of what is concrete and personal and daily for our students. Preconditions include working with students' "specific needs, problems, and concerns of everyday life."

I think Lyons would agree with the general idea that writing should be related to students in some way, because he describes how he might use the concept of place to generate meaningful entry points into public discourse. In "Rhetorical Sovereignty," Lyons mentions one example of public discourse that would be appropriate for students in his area to write about, which was the proposed "removal" of a homeless shelter because it was too close to a neighborhood that was becoming more upscale (463). However, Lyons' thinking is different from Giroux's, and from mine, because this neighborhood example might not address the specific needs and concerns that the area students would identify. That is, even though we would want students to be concerned about such a proposal, they might not be.

Writing topics should be coordinated with students' needs and concerns, for two reasons. First, if the topic is removed from students' experiences, then they can still think of power and how it functions as a problem belonging to other people. This would be a particularly likely outcome for middle- and upper-class students, who, as Bruce Herzberg suggests, have an easier time seeing poverty as an individual problem. Conversely, a different group of students might think that nothing can be done about the particular way in which they experience oppression in their lives. This might be particularly true for American Indian students from reservations who come to state universities, because that

aspect of their culture is geographically removed and less well known, compared to that of other students. In other words, if Kyle, Ben, Jeff and Renee already feel like their experiences are marginalized or invisible, courses that do not include their needs and concerns would only reinforce their sense of isolation. These are the reasons I want topics for teaching toward public discourse to come from students, rather than from place.

On the other hand, it is neither possible nor desirable to survey the interests of each and every student, and only ask students to write about their current interests. Instead, two solutions are possible. Ideally, I would adapt Freire's model of discovering some of the generative themes for students and then using those themes to develop critical consciousness.¹² The themes would vary with the kind of institution in which we are teaching, geographical location, course level (first year, juniors, etc.), and current events in the larger context, such as a federal election year. However, such a project may not be feasible for many teachers. For that reason, I would design assignments that are open-ended enough that students could apply principles to any number of needs and concerns. I will provide examples of how this could be done in chapter five, but for now, the point I am making is that writing assignments should be related to students needs and concerns.

However a teacher would come to know about the students' interests, writing about the themes cannot be the goal of the course itself in a critical pedagogy class. Giroux explains the way in which students' daily needs and concerns are connected to critical consciousness.

¹² I do not suggest that we need to use Freire's specific methods. Means of identifying generative themes could include anything from a formal, intensive action research project conducted once every five years, to an informal, annual project with focus groups.

But it must be emphasized that literacy as defined by Freire only becomes relevant if it is grounded in the cultural milieu that informs the context of the learners' everyday lives. Freire makes this quite clear in his claim that students need to be able to decode their own lived realities before they can understand the relations of dominance and power that exist outside of their most immediate experiences (228).

Neither Freire nor Giroux is calling for students to simply write about their experiences with power. The emphasis for both theorists is on students learning to “decode” their “own lived realities” in order to understand the systems of “dominance and power” within which those realities occur. Giroux explains further, “That is, they must learn to speak with their own voices, draw from their own experiences, and produce classroom ‘texts’ that reflect the social and political issues important to their lives” (228). In other words, students can use personal material to understand how power is reproduced in society. Then, students can become active participants, and work toward transformation of existing power structures.

Giroux is calling for analysis within a recognized context, and then action, specifically in writing. In contrast to simple expression, which may or may not be what Renee's fifth grade teacher was encouraging, Giroux expects that students will apply their new understanding to the world beyond themselves, and that they will craft and present that understanding in written texts.

As Giroux suggests, I think these four students can use their interest in what is personal to develop their understanding of the systems within which their experiences occur. As the reader will see, Ben and Kyle are working with a concept of the personal that is similar to Renee's. For Jeff, the personal is less emotional, but still individual. In

chapter five of this project, I will explore specific ways in which a class could be taught that honors and includes these students' current investments in writing as personal, relational and reflective, and which also connects those interests to the larger society in which they occur.

Ben

Ben¹³ began his writing history essay with this sentence: "For most of my life I have not really cared for writing." However, he establishes a theme in this paper that he repeats in his interview at the end of Expressive Writing, which is that Ben does like writing when it is personal and relational. For Ben, the personal can include something as simple as a topic to which he can relate, as well as something as significant as the deaths of friends and relatives. What's important to Ben is whether he actually cares about whatever he is writing about, as he explains in his writing history.

Overall I wish I was a better writer. I wish that I could have got all A's on my papers that I have written in high school, but I didn't. I think it was because of the way I looked at writing. As I mentioned before for most of my life I have not cared about writing and it goes to show that I didn't when I got bad grades on my papers in high school. I really need something to motivate me when it comes to writing, because I can't really write about a topic that I don't really care about. Finally I wish that I can enjoy writing. It will help me a lot if I enjoyed writing I would probably write all the time, and do very well on what I wrote.

Ben is sure that he needs to care about his topic in order to write well. I want to point out one way in which Ben is unlike the other three students: Ben does enjoy writing research

¹³ Please read Appendix D for biographical information about Ben.

papers when he is interested in the topic. None of the others indicated any interest in research papers. For Ben, the form of a paper is less important than that he have a personal connection with the topic. He writes, “When it comes to writing I really do well on papers that I can relate to such as the video game paper, I play video games and I should know about what effects it has on the society” In other words, as long as he is interested in the topic, Ben is interested in the writing.

In addition, such research writing has a relational component for Ben. In his interview at the end of Expressive Writing, Ben repeats that he enjoys research writing, and then states further, “I just enjoy learning about new things so I can talk about it when it comes up, as a subject.” This is an interesting comment to think about in relation to rhetorical sovereignty. Ben’s interest in conversation, especially as an informed participant, suggest he might be eager to develop his knowledge and skills so that he can part of larger, cultural conversations. Most of Ben’s comments about writing as relational, however, were related to writing that he did about grief and other emotional struggles.

For example, Ben wrote about the loss of Mel,¹⁴ his mother’s partner. Ben wrote about Mel in his “This I Believe” paper, to help explain his belief that everything happens for a reason. I knew that the paper was important to Ben, because we had talked about Mel many times over the course of the semester. In his interview, I asked Ben about what it was like for him to write that paper.

R: Did you ever write about his death before?

B: No.

R: What was it like, to write about that, for that paper, in this class?

¹⁴ Mel is a pseudonym.

B: It's funny, I just put like something into it, the, what are those papers, class evaluations or something like that? I put a little bit of something in that. I put that it was hard to, but I just felt like I had to write about him, show at least somebody that he was a good guy, a great guy. Kind of helped me out in the grieving process a little bit too like, you know, show him and all that stuff. Made me feel a little bit better.

Ben indicates that part of what was significant about that writing was that he showed the writing to someone else. In the context of the class, that would have been any peer reviewers he would have worked with, and also me, as the teacher. However, Ben also explains later that he shares writing such as this with his mother and counselor. I know he had been eager to get the paper back from me, so that he could show it to his mom.

R: Sounds like part of what made you feel better was um the honoring him. You said you could show somebody that he was a good person. That sounds like a way of honoring him.

B: Yeah. I enjoyed doing that. It's just like, I don't know. That paper was hard for me to write.

R: Are you glad that you wrote it?

B: Yeah, I'm glad that I wrote it.

In some ways, all three of the themes are present in this writing of Ben's. The assignment asks students to describe a belief and how they came to have that belief, so it begins as something personal. Then, Ben chose to write about a topic that most of us consider deeply personal, which is the loss of someone we love to an early death. The writing is relational, in that it functions, in part, as a testimony that Ben can share with readers

about who Mel was and how he lived. Finally, Ben also uses this writing for purposes of reflection on Mel's life and what he learned from him, similar to how Renee seems to have used the poem about her grandfather in high school.

One of the challenges for me in reading Ben's paper was the simplicity of Ben's belief that "everything happens for a reason." The structure of the class and the nature of the assignment gave me no useful way to question that belief. I wrote the assignment to draw students' attention to influences that shaped their thinking on a certain topic, because first year college students often think of their beliefs as reflections of provable facts and not the results of a specific set of life experiences and influences. As Lester Faigley discusses in *Fragments of Rationality*, students tend to write personal narrative without questioning it. The result is a unified self on the page that bears no resemblance to the complexity of life, including conflicting emotions, identities and commitments. Within this problematic though interesting Expressive Writing class, I thought I could at least draw attention to the complexity of how students form beliefs. However, Ben and the other students wrote fairly tidy essays, with clear lines of influence and comfortable conclusions.

One of the problems with this kind of writing for Ben as an American Indian is that it does not critique the social patterns that contribute to higher mortality rates for Indian peoples. If Ben only writes essays about people he has lost, he is not contributing in any way to the change I know he wants to see in Indian Health Services on his reservation. Lyons would sympathize personally with Ben, but he would also want Ben to discover some way in which he can increase the quality of health and health care on White Earth. As I discuss in chapter three, Ben wants to improve the quality of life for

Ojibwe people, but he really doesn't know how. Until a class includes some opportunity for social critique, essays like this have no power to improve conditions for the group.

When students write about personal topics that are sensitive or difficult, as Renee and Ben did, the teacher is left with the challenges of responding to that writing. When I responded to writing from Renee and Ben, I was challenged with the ethical and teaching dilemmas closest to those described by Ann Ruggles Gere. (For more on ethics in responding to student writing, see Morgan.) Sometimes these challenges also related directly to my researcher role in this project.

Gere describes several ethical challenges in responding to students' personal writing. First, the teacher has more power than her students, whatever the mix of gender, race, class and ethnicity in the classroom. In one example of how that power is enacted, the teacher can function as an editor, choosing what to see and emphasize. In chapter four of my project, the reader will see the way in which Renee correctly perceives this problem, and how she, in part, challenged this power of the teacher to interpret her words. In my response to Renee, it was important for me to acknowledge her words, the emotion she conveyed, and the fact that I am aware that teachers and others sometimes do use words to obscure, to wound, and to manipulate.

Another challenge in using personal writing is that we risk consuming others' trauma for our own pleasure. For those students who have a trauma narrative to write, this may feel like an invasion of their privacy; students may feel compelled to share information they do not want to share. For those students who have no traumas to write about, the temptation can be great to fictionalize. Thus, the very fact that the personal is

interesting can create problems for both the teacher and student.¹⁵

Finally, Gere also describes the potential that teachers may appropriate students' writing. To explain, Gere cites the following from bell hooks in *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*:

No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still colonizer, the speaking subject, and you are now at the center of my talk (hooks 152)

My clearest experience with this challenge is with Renee's paper about words, which is the focus of chapter four. When I read her paper, I knew immediately that Renee had said many important things and I was fortunate to read them...and that she had handed me material I could use in my dissertation. I struggled with competing concerns about not appropriating her work for my gain (completion of the PhD) and giving her words the attention they deserve within the field of composition studies.

Consulting with an American Indian colleague was an important part of how I dealt with the ethics of my teaching and research in this case. I shared the chapter about Renee in draft form with an American Indian colleague, and I told her I wanted to avoid appropriating Renee's words, as well as those of the other Native students. My colleague advised me to "take care of the students," by guarding their privacy and keeping them at

¹⁵ None of the papers that students wrote for Expressive Writing could be characterized as trauma narratives, even when they conveyed strong emotion (Renee's) or described traumatic losses (Ben's).

the forefront at all times. She encouraged me in my work, and said it is important for others to understand what young Indian students like Renee experience with the English language. This is how I responded to challenges in working with students' personal writing, but every situation is different and requires thoughtful assessment.

Gere's primary suggestion is that we make space for silence in students' personal writing. She says that we need to teach them that silence is acceptable, and along the way, help students distinguish between constructive silence, i.e. that which they choose for their own purposes, and "corrosive" silence which is created by fear of not having a personal story that is good enough, or one that makes the student vulnerable. She notes that students can, like Tim O'Brien in "The Vietnam in Me," inform the reader when they are not saying something, while claiming the right to not say it. This allows students the dignity of asserting that they have something to say, while respecting their right not to say it.

Kyle

Although I gave no explicit instruction in the intentional use of silence, Kyle¹⁶ seems to have known how to use it anyway. While Kyle did choose to include some private and sensitive information in writing for class, he did so less often and with less detail than Ben and Renee. For example, early in the semester, Kyle alluded to some problem he had in the summer between high school and college. As a freewriting topic, I had asked students to write about why they were in college.

¹⁶ Please read Appendix F for biographical information about Kyle.

During this last summer I was making some bad choices. Quickly what turned out to be a every other day thing, turned into being a daily routine. I didn't want that for myself and I knew I was doing wrong.

So I decided to go to college to better myself not only for my education, but to turn my life around. From these last couple of days, I've been doing much better than before, and I am thankful for that.

Kyle never mentioned this struggle again, either in conversation or in writing for class. In the brevity of these comments, and the infrequency with which Kyle wrote about similar topics, he demonstrates less interest in writing about the personal, at least for class, than Ben and Renee. However, in his interviews, Kyle talked more about personal writing outside of class than the other students did. Because I work closely with Kyle's use of personal writing in chapter three, I will describe it only briefly here.

At the end of fall semester, Kyle explained that he had begun to write in a journal outside of class. He said he had done writing like this before, but that he "kind of stopped after a while," and had "lost touch with writing." During this semester, though, he started this kind of writing again. He explained, "Like it helps me with my problems, I guess. My frustrations with school, and stuff." When I asked what he thought was the connection between writing and his frustrations, Kyle said, "You just, you just feel better. Like, more weight's lifted off your shoulders, like you just, I don't know. It's just like talking to somebody but it's writing it down."

When Kyle says that writing helps with his problems by making him feel as if a weight has been lifted off his shoulders, he sounds like he is describing catharsis. We

have already briefly looked at how Renee and Ben have used writing in similar ways. On the one hand, I think most people would understand that some relief from stress and anxiety can be a desirable writing outcome. When Kyle feels better, he might have more energy for priority matters, and he might even think more clearly about the decisions he has to make. However, for many people, writing as catharsis is unsatisfying because it doesn't change anything. This would be Lyons' and Vizenor's concern. In Kyle's case, though he feels less pressure after writing about his frustrations, he is still in the same circumstances that created the stress in the first place. In addition, he might have less energy available for changing his circumstances. In other words, stress can energize and motivate people to create change, so less stress may not be helpful.

For American Indians, catharsis could be a much larger problem interfering with self-determination. The kind of writing that Kyle describes does nothing to address any of the social injustices that could be contributing to his stress. For example, during the second semester, Kyle describes academic trouble he is having in a 100-level archaeology class. He blames his troubles, in part, on the poor quality education he received on the reservation. If that were the explanation for his academic stress, then writing about his frustrations with college would do nothing to improve education conditions on the reservation.

However, for Kyle, writing about his frustrations does serve a purpose beyond immediate emotional release, because he uses the journal later for purposes of reflection. Kyle explains the way he uses the writing to gain a different perspective on his life.

K: Yeah, like, like I'm gonna throw these away, but I like keeping them, like to one I wrote 3 or 4 years ago, I have pages full of, like in a notebook, like 20 pages

full of whatever. And I like reading them, looking at stuff and like shaking my head, like, “that’s retarded.”

R: [laughs] So you like looking back at that?

K: [laughing] Yeah, I was like oh, glad I got through that! ...It’s fun.

Such reflection gives Kyle a chance to laugh at himself, and perhaps also serve as a reminder that his current frustrations, too, might appear silly in retrospect, someday. In this way, Kyle’s journal seems to function similarly to Renee’s use of writing, when she explains that she likes to use writing as a getaway and a tool for reflection and change. Like Renee, Kyle uses journal writing to deal with his emotions, to first express them and later learn from what he wrote about them. While Renee’s use of writing for reflection seems to be more short term or immediate, Kyle keeps his writing as a record that he can reflect on years later.

The personal and reflective themes are the ones that emerge most clearly in Kyle’s words. However, the relational theme is also evident in a couple of ways. First, Kyle says that he enjoys having peers reading his writing in class, which surprises him. This is one of the changes he notes between the beginning and end of the semester. Like Renee, who wants an audience for her writing, Kyle, too, is eager for his words to be read. Second, as I will discuss in chapter three, Kyle expresses an interest in persuasive writing. Though he can’t remember having done any before, Kyle is interested in participating in debate about a controversial topic. He wants to engage with an audience.

It is in this way that Kyle’s interests most clearly have potential to be used toward the goal of sovereignty and a people’s control over how they are represented in public discourse. Kyle wants to interact and be influential. True, he may not yet be noticing the

connection between his frustrations and larger issues of power, including sovereignty for Lakota people. At least, he didn't mention it. But Kyle is a smart young man, and if he were in a class that pointed to some of those connections and taught strategies for addressing them, I think he would readily engage with an audience about those issues.

For example, Kyle was frustrated with his 100-level archaeology course, as noted earlier. I'm not sure that a writing class could help Kyle with the disconnection that he perceived between the course lectures and exams. However, I am curious about how Kyle's experience in the course might have been different if he had approached the course as a text to critique. Specifically, I am wondering about how the course and its relevant texts positioned indigenous cultures. I am not suggesting that there was a connection between Kyle's struggle and any specific cultural representation. However, because most archaeology textbooks and most courses are not provided by American Indians, it is conceivable to me that Kyle might object to some representation of an indigenous culture in an archaeology course.

If that were the case, then Kyle's current interest in writing that is relational might contribute to his use of rhetoric on behalf of cultural sovereignty. In a writing class like the one I describe in chapter five, Kyle could identify such a concern in his daily, individual life that also relates to the larger group of Lakota and other nations, and learn strategies for trying to influence the source for that concern, which in this case would be the archaeology professor or textbook author. Further, if the writing professor were aware of Kyle's interest in writing that is relational, she could emphasize that particular aspect of the rhetorical situation. That is, Kyle's interest in interaction and influence might make it more likely that he would write a letter of concern to his professor or send a letter to the

textbook author or publisher, for example. Although these would be local and limited, they would be acts of rhetorical sovereignty, nonetheless.

Jeff

The themes of the personal and relational in writing are less prominent for Jeff¹⁷ than for the other students, though we can still recognize these features to some degree in what he values about writing. The third theme, reflection through writing, does not apply to Jeff.

Unlike the others, Jeff did not write anything in a formal assignment for class that seemed particularly private or sensitive. In fact, Jeff said a couple things in interviews to indicate that he did not want to write about anything particularly personal. During the first interview, when I asked Jeff whether he would rather write about topics that are personal, informative, or persuasive, Jeff said, “Writing, personal, I don’t care much for sharing my personal life. I mean, I’m kind of boring anyway, but, I mean, I’m a college student that’s pretty blatantly it.” He wasn’t especially interested in writing about himself.

Neither did Jeff indicate that he writes about personal topics outside of class, as the other three did. In fact, Jeff didn’t mention any writing that he does outside of class. With the exception of a poem that he wrote when he was younger, Jeff talked about all of his writing as something that he did for classes only.

Finally, as Jeff indicated in his last interview, he is a private person. He said, “I mean, like, when I really think about it, I’ve never been like a emotionally outgoing person. I’ve always been a very, extremely closed person.” I was surprised when Jeff said this, because we had many conversations during the year, some of which were about

¹⁷ Please read Appendix E for biographical information about Jeff.

personal topics including family difficulties. But even though he was open in conversation with me, he never wrote about topics that seemed to require emotional risks.

However, there were other ways in which Jeff indicated his interest in writing which is personal but not particularly private or sensitive, i.e. writing that is directly related to his experiences, observations and ideas. We can see this interest in his choices about writing, as well as in his interview comments.

In behavioral terms, Jeff wrote most of the essays for Expressive Writing, but none of the essays for Expository writing. Jeff completed five of the six formal assignments for Expressive Writing, all of which incorporated some element of the personal. The next semester, he completed none of the assignments for Expository Writing, most of which incorporated no personal elements. (In the one assignment that did, the opportunity for including the personal was minor.) He earned all three credits for Expressive Writing, but none of the credits for Expository Writing.

Though we can notice this pattern, we can't draw conclusions about why Jeff made the choices he did. His choices may be related to the fact that Expressive Writing was in the fall, when Jeff was new to college and feeling motivated, while Expository Writing was in the spring, when, for many students, the novelty of the experience has faded and one is left with the same challenges one had before. However, it is also possible that the difference in Jeff's completion rate reflects his interest in Expressive Writing assignments over Expository Writing.

For more information, we can look to Jeff's comments in the interviews. In the interviews, Jeff indicates repeatedly that he has a strong preference for assignments in which he is the source of material. We will work with those same interview segments in

chapter three, but they are also important here because they establish Jeff's interest in writing about his own ideas and observations. To summarize, Jeff said in an interview at the end of fall semester that in the Expressive Writing class, he liked being able to use himself as a resource, instead of other people's words and ideas.

J: All in all, [pause 1s] like, between my two favorite English classes would have to be High School English 3 or this one. ... Just because, this one, totally different, totally something I did not expect. I mean, I didn't expect college to be like, well, in this class, this class, anyway, this writing class, to be how it was. I expected it to be more about, "blah blah blah blah, do this, do this, do that, and get your paper."

R: Um hum.

J: Whereas, like [pause 2s] it wasn't.

R: What was it like?

J: It was more like, "here's your paper, here's the guidelines of what you have to do. Take your time, do whatever you need to do to get whatever you need from yourself onto whatever you're doing, and, you're at your own...."

R: Um hum

J: Basically [pause 2s] I felt as if we had [pause 1s] our own pace.

When Jeff says, "do whatever you need to do," he indicates that he perceives an openness to the student's decision about process. Similarly, Jeff's use of the word "guidelines" further suggests that he feels like he can make some choices about what he writes; he is in charge. Finally, Jeff also uses the possessive, which indicates a sense of control. As he characterizes writing in this class, the paper and the process belong to the student. I

interpret comments like these to mean that Jeff is interested in personal writing when “personal” means that his thoughts and experiences are the focus of the writing.

The relational value of writing for Jeff can be seen in the way he talks about a poem that he wrote long before he got to college. What he says about this poem is interesting precisely because he wrote it so long ago, and because of how much it still seems to mean to him. In the first interview, when I asked when he had been successful with writing in the past, Jeff told me about a poem that he wrote in fourth grade about Lewis and Clark.

R: Ok. [pause 2s] So can you tell me about a time when you were successful with writing?

J: Wow. Um [pause 2s]

R: Any—

J: Successful with writing. Um, fourth grade.

R: Yeah?

J: Yeah. I think I explained this in the paper that we wrote in class. I, in fourth grade, I wrote a thing about Lewis and Clark.

R: Yes.

J: And, um, it, I don't know exactly what to call it. It was simply taking the words “Lewis and Clark,” and for each letter, making a sentence. So let's say the “L” in Lewis, make a sentence, starting with that one. On to the next letter, the “e,” and et cetera, all through the Lewis and Clark, making a short paragraph containing information about what they did. I mean, in fourth grade we were very [pause 1s] I was very intrigued by Lewis and Clark, and I was really, uh, stood out to me. So, I did that, and I actually gave it to my teacher, and she

sent it to a Lewis and Clark museum which is located, I do not know, and I really wish I did. But what they told, what they did was they sent me a picture back, and they sent me a copy of my work. They told me, um [laughs a little] that they framed it and they put it in the doorway, when you first come in.

After Jeff said this, I made a note to myself on a piece of paper and then explained to him what I had written.

R: Ok. So I just wrote down, “L and C, museum, frame.” That’s my note to remind me—because I know where that museum is.¹⁸ [Words identifying information about the museum are omitted.]

J: I, the only thing I remember is train tracks. That’s it. Near it. Oh, I cannot remember. I remember—

R: I betcha—I’ve been through that town and I’ve been to that museum. And I don’t happen to remember a framed paragraph in the front, um, but I can figure that out pretty easily, so I can tell you.

J: Ok.

R: So, I wrote myself that note, and I’ll remember. [pause 1s] Ok.

Jeff’s small laugh when he explained that the museum framed and displayed his poem sounded to me like he was a little embarrassed, but also proud. I can only speculate, of course, but perhaps he was even a little embarrassed to be so proud, still, that his poem from fourth grade was valued in this way. Whatever Jeff was feeling when he described the poem, there is no question that the poem remains significant to him. Interestingly, this

¹⁸ I am omitting museum information in order to protect Jeff’s privacy, in case the poem is still displayed and has his name on it. I did look up the museum later, and sent a link for the website to Jeff.

poem is not expressive, and seems to have required some use of sources, even if they were provided by the teacher.

J: Wow. That was so long ago.

R: Yeah.

J: I wouldn't be surprised if they still have it, which I hope they do, because I still have my copy and it's hanging in my room.

R: Really? Do you have any other writings hanging in your room?

J: No. Besides that, I don't do very much writing.

R: Ok. [pause 2s] [interruption, transcription software distraction] So, you were telling me about the Lewis and Clark success. And, that means a lot to you.

You know, I'm pretty impressed that you still have that hanging in your room.

J: Well. I can actually, I think, I don't know when the next time I'm going home, but I think I might be able to bring it.

R: Um hum. [pause 1s] I'd be curious. Yeah. I'd enjoy seeing it. ...

J: The doorway, I think it was.... Um, when you first see the museum, I think it's a one-sided doorway, when you go in. It's kind of like a hall.

R: Um hum.

J: It's like, when you first come in, the first part of the hall, it should be right there.

R: Ok. So, that's what you saw in the picture that was sent to you.

J: Um hum.

R: [pause 1s] Cool. [pause 1s] Ok. Um [pause 1s] Are there any other writing experiences that you've had that you were say were successful? Anything else that jumps out?

J: Not really. I mean—

R: Ok.

J: I mean, through high school, there have been essays, and things I don't remember, but nothing I can pick out, that's particularly successful.

R: Ok. [pause 1s] Why do you think that paragraph was so good that they wanted to frame it and hang it in that museum?

J: I don't know.

R: Why do you think made it that good?

J: I think, well, a lot of it, I have a feeling, had to do with my teacher helping me out. She was very [pause 2s] helpful in a lot of us. She was actually one of my favorite teachers, growing up. To this day, I still know her, and, um [pause 2s] we get along pretty well.

R: Um hum.

Jeff's relationship with his teacher meant a lot to him. So his successful experience was not only, or maybe not even primarily, about the writing. It was also related to the teacher who read the poem and valued it, as well as the museum that framed and displayed it. The teacher was one of his favorites growing up, which suggests that the relationship with this teacher over time gave meaning to the poem that Jeff wrote in fourth grade. How much of Jeff's choice to hang the poem on his bedroom wall was related to the affirmation he received from this significant person that his words had value?

J: So [pause 2s] I can thank her for getting that out there, for mailing it, and the suggestion. And [pause 1s] I don't know. I guess all in all, just, it meant a lot

to me because [pause 2s] I don't know. Just the fact that knowing something I did was taken and kept in a museum.

R: Yeah.

J: It gives a, a good feeling, I guess.

The museum, an official institution, valued something that Jeff wrote. Jeff was recognized by an institution, one that determines his words were deserving of notice, deserving of a frame, deserving of a primary focal point for people interested in significant historical figures such as Lewis and Clark.

Jeff's Lewis and Clark poem was important to him primarily because of the relational context in which he wrote it. In this case, the topic was not personal in any way that I can determine, so that is not a part of what Jeff valued about the poem. In fact, the poem sounds a little bit like a fourth grade version of a research project, in which you learn about someone else's experiences and then report them in writing. I imagine that Jeff might have forgotten about the poem if his teacher had not sent it to the museum, and had the museum not hung it on the wall. Had the poem not been a vehicle for this recognition, and the basis on which his teacher acted on his behalf, Jeff's writing might have been as forgettable to him as the rest of his writing apparently has been ever since. But the poem did create a certain interaction between Jeff and his teacher, and created a certain status for Jeff in relation to the museum. In terms of relationship, not only was Jeff "seen" because of his writing, but he contributed something of value.

Jeff's Lewis and Clark poem is particularly interesting to think about in terms of Lyons call for rhetorical sovereignty, which includes the peoples' control over representations of themselves and their culture. How did a fourth grade Indian boy's

poem about these two colonizers end up in a museum? Was the teacher also American Indian? Did the museum post the poem because it was written by a Native? Is there any indication on the poem or on a nearby sign that the poet is Lakota? What does it mean that a cultural institution, the museum, valued the words of a young Indian boy? Most pressing of all for me, why does the museum's valuation of his poem mean so much to Jeff, all these years later? These are questions I can't answer. Yet they underscore for me the significance of Lyons' call for Indian peoples' control of how they are represented. Jeff's story about his poem helps me to understand the power of seeing oneself in the representations circulating within contemporary culture. I wonder if Jeff's control over that particular representation is part of what makes it so important to him today.

Conclusion

Some of the students' interests in writing are compatible with the objectives of rhetorical sovereignty. Even though none of the three themes lead directly to public advocacy, they are related to writing that could contribute to self-determination for the group. For example, all of the students indicated, in some way, that they are interested in having someone else read their ideas. This pattern suggests that students might respond positively to a class in which they write texts intended to participate in public conversations about culture and representation.

However, other interests are unrelated or even antithetical to rhetorical sovereignty. For example, students' writing for expression of emotion does not appear to offer any opportunities for teaching students how to effectively engage in public matters, although I acknowledge that such writing may contribute to their personal well-being. In addition, in Kyle's emotional expression, we can see that writing about emotions has the

potential to work against goals of self-determination for Indian peoples, if writing about frustrations doesn't lead in any way to productive change.

As participants in dialog with these four students, compositionists sometimes want to affirm, and other times want to question. Following Freire and Giroux, we want to hear about students' experiences and interests, but we also need students to critically engage with the interaction between these topics and the larger social structures that shape them. Students are not yet doing this work, in large part because they were enrolled in an Expressive Writing course that neither encouraged nor taught them to how. However, there is good reason to think that students' current uses for writing will be valuable resources in another course, one that is designed to help them recognize the interactions between their lives and social conversations.

One of the things I learned from students is that they are already using writing to create change in their lives. Even though that change is usually specific to them, I think the agency that is apparent in their current writing can be directed toward public conversations, where the students can also use writing to initiate change. In the next chapter, we will see how the students are demonstrating agency with their writing, whether or not they always realize their potential for influence.

When I taught at Sitting Bull College, I learned the Lakota phrase, *Mitakuye Oyasin*, which means "All my relations." All beings, human and otherwise, are interdependent, and for this reason, what is personal to one is important to the whole. Kimberly Blaeser, Anishnabe¹⁹ from White Earth Reservation in Minnesota and Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of

¹⁹ This is the spelling used by the source text.

Wisconsin-Milwaukee, describes the way in which writing enables her to live fully as a multi-voiced, complex subject, as a living part of an intricately woven web.

No matter what subject we turn to, the past is there within us. I try each time I write to listen honestly to those voices that inhabit me. Sometimes one echo rises up and gives shape to a whole poem. Sometimes the memories softly shade the background like a painter's wash. But prominent or invisible, the stories I carry, the past I remember, provide the relational depth and balance that I hope ground my work in a truth larger than my own small vision.

For Blaeser, and perhaps for all of us, the personal, relational and reflective are inseparable. Individual experience is something like a holographic map for all the surrounding territory of social relations. If we are wise, we can be like Blaeser, trusting the voices and stories that we carry with us to "provide the relational depth and balance" for our limited personal visions.

CHAPTER THREE

WRITING AGENCY

The use of tragedy as a narrative form to tell an Indian story is a problem, because tragedy always ends in death, posits the existence of some damning flaw, and compels little to no action from its audience; as countless critics have observed since the time of Aristotle, tragedy wants to produce catharsis, not change (Lyons, “Actually” 300).

If anyone’s story appears to be tragic, it is Ben’s. During his first semester of college, three of Ben’s family members died. The first was his 19-year-old cousin, who died from a combination of alcohol and prescription drugs. The second was this same cousin’s father, who also died from alcohol and drugs about two weeks later. Ben’s third loss was another cousin, a young woman who drank, drove, and died in a car accident, leaving behind two small children. During the course of the semester, Ben wrote about his birth father serving time in prison, and his mother’s male partner who died from cancer a couple years ago. Tragedy is a constant companion for Ben. Who would blame him if his writing were simply cathartic?

Yet, as I have established elsewhere in this project, Gerald Vizenor and Scott Lyons, among others, have specifically called for writing that rejects tragedy as the end of the story for American Indians. Vizenor calls for survivance writing, explaining that “Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry” (“Aesthetics” 1). Scott Lyons calls for writing that contributes to sovereignty, “the general strategy by

which we aim to best recover our losses from the ravages of colonization: our lands, our languages, our cultures, our self-respect” (449). If students are to use writing on behalf of survivance and sovereignty, then catharsis of real suffering is not enough, and such writing in our classrooms would not be a means of furthering the goals articulated by Vizenor and Lyons. Instead, there must be some way for students to take what they learn in our classes and actually change the conditions of their lives.

Those of us who are teaching for social justice, using cultural studies or other models, would likely embrace this goal of material change. Yet, for the practitioner, there can be a challenge in moving from theory to praxis, in helping students understand the connection between their writing and their ability to do anything with or through their writing. Theoretically, we need the concept of agency to help us make the connection between the student writer and social change. In the specific case of our American Indian students, agency can help us understand how the writing in our classrooms can play a role in the move from tragedy to survivance or sovereignty.

There is some challenge for composition and rhetoric in the spaces between our concepts of social construction, postmodern ideas about the self, and ideological goals of the college writing course. Social construction rightly rejects rugged individualism, and maintains instead that people are shaped by their historical eras and socioeconomic conditions, among other macro forces. Postmodern ideas about the self disrupt older notions of unitary identity and predictable development, and instead consider subjectivities, which are shifting layers and fragments of identity that are constantly in play. The challenge is that if students learn they are fundamentally shaped by social forces more powerful than they are, and they learn that their identities are unstable and

fragmented, then students may be unsure about their own agency.

To explore this idea further, John Trimbur explains the way in which postmodernism changed our ideas about who we are as human beings, including how we think of our power as writers. He writes, “For postmodern compositionists, the critique of the author invariably points back to the Enlightenment and the emergence of a Universal Subject” (62). He credits James Berlin with drawing the connection between the “unified, coherent, autonomous, self-present subject of the Enlightenment” and our notion of the author as “. . . a transcendent consciousness . . . acting as a free and rational agent that adjudicates competing claims for action . . . the author of all his or her behavior.” The Enlightenment concept of the self has a will and the power to direct that will toward specific ends.

For postmodernists, however, there is no stable, unified self, no authorship of our own behavior. Instead, postmodern subjectivity is a kaleidoscopic collection of loyalties, interests, memberships, and experiences, all of which are in constant motion. Lester Faigley explains that, “The subject, like judgments of value and validations, has no grounding outside contingent discourses” (227). In other words, we are constructed by language, but because language has no stable meaning, the postmodern subject is in constant flux with shifting energy and attention. I think postmodernism has been helpful in illuminating the human experience, particularly in regard to identity and lack of ability to control language. However, with a new recognition of our own fragmentation, and in the absence of the clear agency we thought we had with a unified self, we might seem to be victims of social construction and the postmodern condition.

In the simplest of terms, agency is the power to create change. Yet the concept of

agency is not simple at all. At the 2003 Alliance for Rhetoric Societies (ARS) conference, over forty scholars discussed the question, “How ought we to understand the concept of rhetorical agency?” In her report the next spring, Cheryl Geisler states that while most participants argued for a complex understanding of agency, some argued that agency is in fact an illusion (see Gunn and Lundberg). In her comments on the discussion, Geisler warns that the question of agency is fundamental to all fields constructed on the premise that a rhetor is capable of urging a reader or audience toward some kind of change. She says, “If neither our students nor our fellow citizens have such potential or obligations—if agency is illusionary—we may sidestep these questions of potential and obligations as irrelevant...but only at the cost of the irrelevancy of rhetoric” (16). The question of agency is critical if we think that there is any power in the written and spoken word, and if we intend to teach students how to use that power.

The challenge is in theorizing agency alongside complex notions of the subject, but we can do this when we frame our discussion with specific cases. Michael Leff says that we need “to reject an ontology of agency that freezes the concept in static theoretical space and to turn attention to the way agency manifests itself in particular cases and under the pressure of local and historical circumstances” (63). Geisler agrees, and observes that many have refocused on these circumstances of agency. She says, “Mirroring developments in the humanities and social sciences in general, we have become less concerned with determining the universals for rhetorical action and more interested in the specific local and or historical conditions that undergird it” (14). I agree with Leff when he cautions that we should not give free rein to postmodern theorizing without incorporating observations from teaching, saying there is “reason to doubt

theoretical judgments so extreme that they threaten to dissolve individual agents into the cultural ether” (64). As a teacher, I want to be sure that the theories I work with are relevant to my students’ opportunities for creating change in their lives and in the social institutions that shape their lives.

The local and historical conditions related to agency are particularly important when we are talking about writing related to American Indians and other groups of students with subjectivities that include oppression by a dominant group. Faigley observes that postmodernism has been criticized by those who believe “that any attempt to end domination requires a theory of positive social action” (20). Feminists and Marxists in particular, he says, think that agency is insufficiently theorized in postmodernism. For example, Nancy Hartsock questions Foucault’s ideas about people as constructed by power, on the basis that such construction precludes resistance. She asks, “Why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic?” (164). However, Aurelia Armstrong notes that Foucault addressed this criticism in his later work, and many think that agency can co-exist with social and postmodern notions of the subject.

From my perspective, agency expands in postmodernism. The very nature of subjectivity multiplies our sites and sources of power. Far from creating an ineffectual weakness or incapacity for action, our fragmentation is a source of strength. The fact that we have so many subjectivities and the fact they are always in play actually creates opportunities. On the one hand, our particular combination of identities, interests or loyalties at any one moment could make us more receptive to this or that influence. On

the other hand, the constant interplay of subjectivities is also constantly changing the possible influences we can exert.

While it can be difficult to trace the source of an idea, my thinking about the power in subjectivities is similar to Bakhtin's description of language in *Discourse of the Novel*. Bakhtin describes the complexity of a word, saying, "The living utterance... cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance" (276). This is the kind of interaction I imagine between the fragments of all our subjectivities; my subjectivities "brush up against" each other and change, and they also "brush up against" other people's subjectivities. In that complex interaction, the potential for influence is constantly changing. Further, where Bakhtin speaks of "intention" for language, I think of agency for postmodern subjects.

If we imagine the intention of such a word, that is, its directionality toward the object, in the form of a ray of light, then the living and unrepeatable play of colors and light on the facets of the image that it constructs can be explained as the spectral dispersion of the ray-word, not within the object itself . . . but rather as its spectral dispersion in an atmosphere filled with the alien words, value judgments and accents through which the ray passes on its way toward the object; the social atmosphere of the word, the atmosphere that surrounds the object, makes the facets of the image sparkle (277).

The word, as Bakhtin describes it, becomes more beautiful as it fragments, because of its interaction with the social atmosphere. As I think of subjectivity, our agency becomes more complex, and more capable of interacting with (refracting the light of) other

subjects. The “spectral dispersion” of the word for Bakhtin leads me to think of the postmodern fragmentation of identity in similar ways. Far from reducing our influence, postmodern subjectivity allows us to expand our notions of how and where we can be powerful.

Gerald Vizenor certainly rejects any formulation of the postmodern as dissolving agency for Indians. As I have explained elsewhere in this project, Vizenor forwards the concept of survivance as critical for understanding the active and present nature of Indians writing. When Vizenor describes Indians as postindians, as active creators of their lives in spite of tragedy and trauma, he asserts their capacity for agency. In fact, he specifically addresses Native agency within postmodernism.

The postindian, an urgent new word in this book, absolves by irony the nominal simulations of the indian, waives centuries of translation and dominance, and resumes the ontic significance of native modernity. Postindians are the new storiers of conversions and survivance; the tricky observance of native stories in the associated context of postmodernity (1994, viii).

Unlike Hartsock, for Vizenor, subjectivity is an opportunity for Natives to elide imposed expectations and resurface wherever, however, they choose. These two sentences from Vizenor are important for thinking about students’ agency in this project, so I want to look closely at how his language illustrates some of his most important points. First, with the word “postindian,” Vizenor claims that the era in which invaders (appeared to) define who Indians are has ended, and Indians will define their own identities. Like a trickster, Vizenor does not give Indians a new name, but instead emphasizes the absence of what colonizers created, leaving Native peoples free to decide who they are. The term “indian”

with the small “i” is a placeholder for the false identity that was imposed on, but which never represented, real people.

Vizenor’s use of the word “absolves” draws on religious connotations of the dissolution of guilt, which is certainly ironic, given the use of Christianity as a justification for assimilation efforts that relied on constructions of “Indians” as savage. With these words, Vizenor claims authority, which he playfully uses to “waive centuries,” as if they were mere dust motes in the attic. Vizenor takes play very seriously, relying on humor in all forms to enliven Natives’ efforts to define and declare themselves in what he elsewhere terms the “paracolonial” context of America. In declaring that the postindian “resumes,” as if without serious disruption, Vizenor does not minimize the losses or suffering of Indian peoples; instead, he asserts their strength, evident in their “ontic significance.” Indians continue to exist in this modern world, not as the old constructions but as modern people. Further, Vizenor declares that Natives are the “new storiers,” meaning they are now the ones constructing the texts that they use to declare themselves to whomever they choose. Finally, the postindians’ stories feature their own conversions, perhaps from an imposed identity, and their own stories of survivance, their insistence on living in whatever conditions they actively create. As I interpret these words of Vizenor’s, agency is fundamental not only to Indians’ lives, but to their use of language, as well.

Even though Vizenor and I both see opportunities for agency in postmodernism, we are two participants in a complex dialog. People will continue debating whether postmodernism and social construction imply a dissolution of agency, and a full examination of the question is beyond the limitations of this project. While it is important to note the objections some have made (e.g. Hartsock), I proceed with the assumption

that although agency is less clear within the framework of social construction and postmodernism (than it was in the Enlightenment, for example), it is still possible, and I also assume that there is value in exploring how that agency functions.

This project allows us to notice “the way agency manifests itself” in this particular case. I want to try to understand how the four student writers conceive of agency in general and how it relates to writing for them. What kind of power do they think they have? How is their sense of power similar to or different from Vizenor’s concept of agency? What are the ways in which the students want to use their power?

Two themes emerged in this case study regarding agency. In the first theme, students write about themselves as if they are agents with power, and they say in interviews that they want to increase their agency, or ability to effect change, especially change in others. However, we see in the second theme that the students sometimes do not recognize the agency that they already have. In both cases, students’ statements present a complex picture of how they are perceiving their own agency related to language.

All four students exhibit aspects of these themes. However, Ben’s writing and later interview comments about his reservation are particularly useful for talking about agency. First, Ben generated more material that is directly related to agency, while the others’ writing includes but does not feature agency as extensively. Second, he expressed a specific desire for agency, while the others expressed the same desire in a more general and abbreviated way. For these reasons, I will feature Ben in this chapter, although the reader will see evidence of these patterns for all the students. Because I work extensively with Renee’s writing in chapter three, I will only refer to it occasionally in this chapter.

Renee demonstrates both in her writing and in her spoken words that she also has a complex experience of agency related to writing. She expresses confidence in her writing and says she uses it for her own purposes, while she also describes writing in which she simply responds to the direction and expectations from other people. I discuss her words as a survivance narrative, which is a specific manifestation of agency, in part because of how she uses her writing to transform and assert her own literacy in the college writing classroom. The volume of material, plus the narrower focus, require a separate chapter. For these reasons, I will reference Renee's words occasionally and briefly in this chapter.

Ben wrote an essay about drugs on the reservation and talked about it later in an interview. In order to describe the connections between Ben's words and agency, I need first to explain the assignment, including the background for its design. As a new faculty member at my institution, I was expected to teach the Expressive Writing class in a particular way. Academic freedom allowed flexibility in the assignments I used, but the course plan on file with the institution governed the essential goals and structure of the course. Because I was aware of the limitations of personal writing, related to academic success as well as social justice issues, I had reservations about the course. In regard to academic success, there is a dearth of research showing that personal writing teaches students to use language in ways that will allow them to achieve at a high level in other classes; for example, there isn't usually any attention paid to analysis or argument, which are the usual currency of college writing success. The social justice issues in how we teach struggling writers (who are also often economically or otherwise disadvantaged) are articulated well by Lisa Delpit, and she argues those students should be taught how to be successful in academia, because it is a means to power. I agree. In addition, I am

unwilling to simply replicate the “training” that many conservatives and educational institutions want from writing courses. Such training is expected to be in the acceptable standard for grammar, punctuation, content and form that is common in the business and political world, where that standard is used far more often to support rather than challenge hegemony.

Part of what was interesting about this class, then, was the question of whether I could use personal writing to help students develop some of the thinking that I thought would be important beyond the class. Because one of my greatest concerns was the insularity of personal writing, I designed the “social issue” assignment. In this paper, I wanted students to “write their own bridge” from their experiences to the larger context for those experiences, to the social world that constructed them. The task for students was to identify a social issue they cared about, explain why they cared, i.e. what in their experience had led them to notice and feel concern about the issue, explain why that issue was a problem for society, and then write about their solution for the problem. In keeping with the course plan, students did no research for the paper, but wrote instead from their life experiences.

Ben and Agency

Ben writes in his social issue paper about the power that individuals have to change their lives, specifically in regard to prescription drug abuse. In his introductory paragraph, Ben writes, “Many of my people are addicted to the drugs there is also an easy way to get through them.” In this one sentence, Ben reveals a tension in regard to agency that is apparent throughout his paper. On the one hand, “people are addicted,” which implies they have lost control over their behavior. On the other hand, “there is an easy

way to get through” the addiction to drugs, so change is both possible and straightforward. This paradoxical thinking about others’ agency is evident from start to finish. At times, Ben sounds like he is using an Enlightenment concept of agency, while at other times he indicates an awareness of how complex change can be.

While Ben sometimes suggests that the solution is simple, he readily acknowledges the weight of the problem. He establishes his awareness of this reality in the second paragraph of his essay. “I and my family had to find out the hard way that pills are bad, with two of my cousins passing away, and other friends and individuals that passed away from overdosing on the drug.” Anything that Ben says about drug addiction cannot be passed off as glib; he certainly can’t be dismissed as an arrogant outsider who doesn’t know anything about addiction. Yet sometimes Ben’s comments do seem facile, because they imply that people can just walk away from addiction but don’t. In the next sentence after describing these losses through death, Ben writes, “Although there were deaths to people that were caused by this drug, and most recently more and more deaths, many people still keep taking the drugs.” The word “although” is important, because it implies a potential but incomplete relationship between what people experience, i.e. losses through death from drugs, and their actions, i.e. they “keep taking” the drugs. The suggestion is that the addicted people could stop, but they don’t.²⁰

Ben doesn’t offer any explanation for why the people don’t stop taking drugs after their loved ones die, but he does indicate his faith in two things that could help people

²⁰ Ben refers to this potential relationship again later in the essay, saying, “Even though all these deaths had occurred, many of the people still take the drug today it is as if the deaths didn’t affect them even if it was one of their close friends.” Ben presumes, as many people do, that some experiences are so powerful that we can change our lives in response to them.

stop taking drugs. The first is information, and the second is support. Ben is confident that if people have enough of the right kind of information, they will stop taking drugs.

The people that are taking the drug get a good high, but they don't realize what they are doing to their body. I have seen or heard of pregnant women on the reservation that are taking this drug. They know it's bad, but they probably don't know the full extent of the drugs and the damage that it does to the baby that they are carrying.

There has to be classes to show them what they are doing to themselves, and how it not only affects their selves it also affects the people around them. I think if they see all the things in life that the drugs affect then maybe they will realize and make a change and get off the drugs.

Ben thinks there is a relationship between information and the changes that people make. As Ben describes it here, knowledge creates an opportunity for agency, for change.

I think Vizenor would say the idea that information as an answer to drug abuse on the reservation is really the simulation of an answer. Or at least, it's a tricky answer. Drug abuse is a complex problem. In his first paragraph, Ben hints at some of the social conditions that might encourage and reinforce drug abuse. First, Ben suggests that health care on the reservation is poor and provides inappropriate care. He says, "Through the health care provided on the reservation anybody can complain about a little back pain and go and get pills from the clinic." Ben's information about the physical effects of drug abuse might not appear persuasive next to the reward of easily accessed and inexpensive immediate gratification in the form of pain pills.

Ben also hints at socioeconomic factors reinforcing drug abuse when he comments, "Many people on the reservation sell the pills they get, to earn a little extra

money on the side, but most who sell are addicted to the drugs.” As noted elsewhere in this project, the employment rate on White Earth Reservation is low, the poverty level is high, and there are limited options for paid employment. Drug abuse in many communities worldwide is an industry of its own, circulating cash throughout the community from the drug user to the dealer to the grocery store to the landlord. Information about long term physical effects of drug abuse does nothing to put gas in the car today.

Finally, Ben flags “information” as the simulation of an answer when he describes the abundance of information about the physical effects of drug abuse that is available to drug users on the reservation. He tells us himself that community members are surrounded by information in their daily lives, as they see their cousins, aunts and uncles, parents and neighbors affected by drugs. He writes, “It is a big problem that the individuals cannot get off the drug when their own friend died from it.” It is not as if people don’t know that drugs are dangerous. People are dying. Information about the physical dangers of drugs seems like a feeble answer, one with no potential to create change.

Yet, Ben makes a couple of statements that suggest there might be something real behind the simulation. Early in the essay, Ben pairs information about physical effects with another kind of information. He says, “There has to be classes to show them what they are doing to themselves, and how it not only affects their selves it also affects the people around them.” While the classes seem lifeless, Ben begins here to make a case for why information can help solve the problem: drug users might respond to information about the effects of their drug use on other people. Later in the essay, Ben explains why

he believes that kind of information can be powerful.

Ben writes, “What makes me confident that all this will work is, someone close to me was addicted to a drug, and he didn’t realize how much it was hurting the people around him and what he has turned into ever since he started the drug. I have seen him change his life, get off the drug and become a better man.” Part of what Ben points to here is the power of one person’s experience to change the way another thinks. In this case, Ben is describing his father, so perhaps the power of example increases when the person is close to you. But I also want to notice that Ben says his father “didn’t realize how much it was hurting the people around him. . . .” Later in the essay, Ben writes, “We need to show the people that the drugs are bad for them and that it affects the whole community instead of their selves.” Does the power of information change when the information is about one’s community? I think Vizenor would say it does, and I think we can see in Ben’s words that he thinks it does, too.

When Vizenor writes about the personal or individual, he always places it within the context of the community. There is value in an individual’s experience, but it is never as if the personal is actually separate from the communal. In “Aesthetics of Survivance,” Vizenor quotes Dorothy Lee’s comments about the relationship between the individual and the community. In *Freedom and Culture*, Lee explains that the “Dakota were responsible for all things, because they were at one with all things. In one way, this meant that all behavior had to be responsible, since its effects always went beyond the individual. In another way, it meant that an individual had to, was responsible to, increase, intensify, spread, recognize, experience this relationship,” and, for the “Dakota, to be was to be responsible; because to be was to be related; and to be related meant to be

responsible” (qtd. “Aesthetics” 18). Vizenor explains the connection between responsibility and the concept of survivance.

Personal, individual responsibility in this sense is communal and creates a sense of presence and survivance. Responsibility in the course of natural reason is not a cause of nihilism or victimry.... Original, communal responsibility, greater than the individual, greater than original sin, but not accountability, animates the practice and consciousness of survivance, a sense of presence, a responsible presence of natural reason and resistance to absence and victimry” (“Aesthetics” 18-19).

When Ben says there is power in recognizing how drug abuse affects other people, he is saying, with Vizenor, that survivance is related to responsibility. Survivance, the power to live beyond one’s immediate circumstances, lies in the recognition that those circumstances are shared, and they are actively co-created. This point is closely connected to the second claim that Ben makes about what should be done about drug abuse on his reservation.

Ben thinks that social support could help people stop taking drugs. He writes, “Most of the people that are addicted to the pills want to get off of it, but they have no family that would want to help them out with the problem. There should be support groups that will help these individuals out and get them on the road to recovery.” Ben indicates that the lack of social support may be one reason people become addicted. “...[S]ome of the addicts don’t have any family or friends to support them, and that is one of the reasons why I think they use the drugs in the first place.” He is suggesting that if you remove one of the causes for addiction (which he believes is lack of social support),

then people will have less reason to abuse drugs and will be more likely to quit using drugs. The possibility of agency rests, in part, within community; more accurately, as Ben describes it, agency exists in the relationships between individuals and other people. In this way, Ben's thinking is similar to the ideas I articulate about agency earlier in the chapter. Agency exists in the constant interaction of subjectivities, like Bakhtin's "living dialogic threads." As Ben writes about it, people in the community create an opportunity for change.

Ben also presumes that tribal officials have the power to do something about drug abuse on the reservation. Yet it looks to him as if they are not doing what they could.

What is very surprising is that most tribal leaders know about the statistics and information, that there is a problem with drugs and Native Americans that live on the White Earth reservation, and they don't do anything to help prevent the abusing of the drugs that are killing the Indians. As the tribal leaders they should do something about the problem.

As Ben sees it, tribal leaders can do something, and they should. Their government roles must give them access to resources that they could direct toward a solution. In other words, Ben conveys here his sense that tribal leaders have agency in regard to the problem of drug abuse among members. Yet he doesn't see them acting on that agency.

While I don't think Vizenor would argue with Ben's desire for leadership from tribal officials, he might be skeptical about whether there is any more agency available in tribal officials than in the interdependence of community members overall. In one chapter of *Manifest Manners*, "Radical Durance," Vizenor conveys his skepticism about government officials whose positions were instituted by the colonizer for purposes of

managing colonization. Using his own laser sharp irony and wit, Vizenor recites stories of tribal leaders who were foolish and weak, at least at times. Though tribal leaders may act wisely, with regard for both the personal and the communal, they also may not.

Vizenor might urge Ben to focus on less obvious sources of power, such as the support groups that Ben is already proposing. The surface appearance of power, from Vizenor's perspective, seldom reveals the means or realities of survivance for postindians. I would point out to Ben that in fact, he already seems to have located the people who have the power, and if tribal officials aren't demonstrating any, perhaps their power isn't as significant as Ben seems to think. After all, their relatives and neighbors are suffering, too; if they could do something, why wouldn't they? In a conversation like this, Ben might be able to re-evaluate his understanding of who is powerful, and where power comes from.

Obviously, it is beyond the parameters of this study to join Ben in speculating about why people are addicted and what conditions would help them to stop using drugs. What we can do, however, is notice that in Ben's writing, he ascribes agency to the addicts as well as to the community. Addicts are the agents who "keep taking" and "use the drugs." Tribal leaders don't "do anything" but should "do something." What does Ben indicate about his own sense of agency?

Ben's confidence in the ability of other people to create change is sharply contrasted with statements he made in the interview related to his own agency. Ben stated that he would like people from his tribe to read and be influenced by his essay about drugs on the reservation. However, he is unable to get beyond his desire to publish his paper to a plan for actually doing it.

R: ... Do you feel like you have important things to say?

B: Not really. I just put it out there, you know. But I have a strong belief in what I'm saying, too.

R: Hm. [pause 6s] What would you want to do with writing if you could?

B: What do you mean?

R: I don't know. I don't know what I mean. I'm just kind of paying attention to that idea of what's important for you to say, what's important for you to write, and you have to write about something you believe strongly in. I believe that what you have to say is important, but you're not as sure. Um who else do you think would benefit from knowing what you have to say?

B: Yeah, the whole reservation. You know, from my project five. I'd like to put that in an article in a newspaper or something, just to show them that something has to be done or something.

R: Mm. Could you do that?

B: Yeah. Probably. I don't know. I have to talk to like the reservation newspaper thing and see if I could put something in there.

R: Huh. Ok. So, that's an idea right now in this moment. What would it take to actually get you to do that? What would you need to know or do to really take action on that thought?

B: Mm, I don't know. Figure out how to do it.

R: Uh huh. So if you could figure out how to do it, how to put that paper or some version of it in the newspaper, you feel like you would do that?

B: Yeah. I would.

R: Uh huh. What do you think the result could be?

B: I'm not sure. I'm not sure at all. Hopefully it will help benefit people, you know.

R: Um hum.

B: But I'm not sure.

As I interpret Ben's comments in this transcript, he expresses a desire for agency, for influence in the community, but at the same time, he has only vague ideas about how to get his ideas "out there." He wants to publish his essay in his community's newspaper, but doesn't go any further than a generally stated interest.

In short, Ben does not know what to do with the words he has written. He doesn't have information about how to make them public, and he also doesn't have role models to show him how. This illustrates the political failure of personal writing in the Expressive Writing class. Ben has generated ideas, written about them, and now doesn't have a means to do anything with them. In short, he doesn't know how to reach his audience.

If Ben had been enrolled in a class like the one Scott Lyons describes in "Rhetorical Sovereignty," the outcome could have been different. Lyons argues for writing courses centered on writing that is clearly connected with the public sphere. He wants to see American Indian rhetorical texts taught alongside other texts that argue for sovereignty and self-determination. In addition, Lyons' wants students to write the kinds of texts that have potential for entering and influencing conversations in the public sphere.

Vizenor provides one example of an American Indian rhetorical text that might have influenced Ben's sense of his own agency. In "Aesthetics of Survivance," Vizenor

describes an early, independent newspaper on the White Earth Reservation, the *Progress*. The stated mission of the newspaper, reprinted partially below, includes the intent to advocate for the “best interests of the tribe.” Ben might find the parallel with his own interests in the well-being of the tribe to be significant, even though the newspaper points to political rather than immediate social concerns.

The main consideration of this advocacy will be the political interests, that is, in matters relative to us and the to the Government of the United States. We shall not antagonize the Government, nor act, in the presentation of our views, in any way outside of written or moral law. We intend that this journal shall be the mouth-piece of the community in making known abroad and at home what is for the best interests of the tribe. It is not always possible to appeal to reach the fountain head through subordinates, it is not always possible to appeal to the moral sentiment of the country through these sources, or by communication through general press.... (qtd Aesthetics 6-7).

Further, Ben might be interested in the story of the newspaper’s fight to exist. Vizenor explains that the newspaper was shut down twice by federal agents, all equipment and supplies were confiscated, and both the editor and publisher were ordered to leave the reservation. Not only did the two men remain on the reservation, but they persisted in their advocacy for their tribe. Only after an investigation by a subcommittee of the US Senate and then a decision in the United States district court was publication officially permitted.

As Ben learns about the mission and challenges for this newspaper, he might feel motivated to learn more about the newspaper available on his reservation today. Vizenor

explains the way he was affected by reading the *Progress* at the Minnesota Historical Society.

I was transformed, inspired, and excited by a great and lasting source of a native literary presence and survivance. The newspaper countered the notion of a native absence and instead sustained a personal source of solace and enlightenment as well as a unique historical identity. I slowly, almost reverently, turned the fragile pages of the newspaper and read stories and notes by and about my distant relatives (6).

Like Vizenor, Ben is also Ojibwe from Minnesota. Ben's relatives, too, may have appeared in the pages of the *Progress*. The tribal connection alone would be likely to mean something to Ben, and I imagine, at least, that he would feel some connection to this powerful rhetorical text advocating, through journalism, for his nation. Vizenor explains, "The *Progress* created a sense of presence, survivance, and native liberty by situational stories, editorial comments, reservation reportage, and the resistance of the editors denied a measure of arbitrary federal dominance, historical absence, and victimry" (Aesthetics 10). How might reading the *Progress* transform Ben's sense of what is possible for him to do with his own writing?

Lyons would say that one powerful outcome of Ben reading the *Progress* would be Ben's learning about how he can participate in public conversations about matters of importance to White Earth Reservation and the Minnesota Ojibwe nation. Although Lyons would not dismiss other benefits that Ben might experience from such a reading, he sees this kind of participation in the public sphere, via writing, as one of our primary objectives in college writing classes. While I share the goal of students learning how to

influence public conversations, I want to be sure we do not miss the power of making a personal connection with the public issue. Vizenor says that he was “transformed, inspired, and excited,” and he implies that his emotional, personal response contributed to his decision to do further research with the *Progress*. In other words, I think the personal sometimes has a power of its own that can contribute productively to writing about larger social issues.

Using Vizenor’s postmodern theorizing about Native culture, we can see that Ben’s essay reflects a complicated sense of agency. Ben suggests that information and social support would help address the problem of drug abuse on the White Earth Reservation. His initial solution, information about the effects on the physical “I” of the drug user, might not have much power when it is disconnected from the social, communal context. But Ben’s solution of information about how one’s behavior affects the community, along with social support from those same community members, would be more likely to enable survivance than any official action from tribal leaders. In these suggestions for change, Ben is highlighting sources of power that come from and contribute to survivance for the whole community. In his uncertainty about how to convey these ideas to community members, Ben demonstrates that his sense of agency is partial. As Lyons maintains, however, Ben can increase his agency by reading rhetorical texts written by other community members.

In the next section, we will see some of the ways that Kyle, Jeff, and also Renee experience agency in relation to writing. They seem to notice their own agency more in some kind of writing than others.

Presence, Absence, and Survivance

Vizenor tells us that writing in which a postindian is present contributes to survivance. In varying degrees and ways, the four students in this study assert their presence with writing. That presence is never uncomplicated; the students are always writing within someone else's discourse, writing from what they know even as it changes. Yet we can see that they believe some of their writing makes them stronger. Kyle and Jeff in particular describe their writing in ways that suggest they sometimes perceive themselves as active agents who are present in the process of writing, using language for their own purposes. At other times the two seem to think of themselves as absent, when they characterize their writing as directed by a teacher; as they describe it, they are hardly even participating in their own writing processes. Yet Lyons would tell them that they are still agents, still making choices in regard to language, even when those choices are restricted. As I will explain, I think Lyons would be right.

In his writing history paper, Kyle explains the ways in which he has experienced absence related to writing. He explains that writing in school was an experience structured from the outside, with little input from him. He says, "Basically what I was taught about writing, is to use good grammar, don't use abbreviations for words, and don't mess up." Right away, we can see that the rules for writing exist outside of Kyle, and those are the ones he is accountable to. There is an implied sense of punishment in Kyle's words when he writes, "and don't mess up." The rules are those of a current traditional style composition classroom, and the consequences for "messaging up" on grammar and punctuation are usually lower grades. Kyle has learned that there is a right and a wrong way to write, and he will be punished with a lower grade if he doesn't follow the teacher's rules. Any criteria he might impose for "good" writing are irrelevant.

Kyle indicates that in his school, there wasn't much opportunity for writing outside a classroom like this. He writes, "...there wasn't much in my high school that anyone could do if they liked writing, besides doing your research papers in class." And when writing other than research papers was needed, Kyle explains that the teachers did it: "We didn't have any school news papers, no one did any editing in the year book. There was the occasional news in school, but usually a teacher did all that stuff." As Kyle describes it, students may have been objects of news, but they did not produce or disseminate the written news themselves. Thus, in Kyle's education as he describes it so far, writing was shaped by the teacher's agenda and rules.

Yet Lyons would argue that Kyle was still making choices about writing, and I think he is right. In fact, Kyle says in a later interview that in high school he wrote in a journal on his own outside of school. So even though he doesn't seem mindful of those choices in this writing, I believe Kyle would actually agree with Lyons and say that yes, he did have some choice. Still, Lyons' would argue that Kyle also made choices about his writing in school, and I would agree. Even though Kyle's options were few, and there were undesirable consequences for some of those choices, he still made them. Lyons argues that Natives are always choosing, even when the choices are limited. Even in the early years of colonization, the "x-marks" that tribal leaders made on treaties recorded their active assent to change. The signers did not want the change, and they understood the tribes would suffer because of the change, but they made their x-marks in order to maximize potential for the tribe to gain from that change. The signers were not powerless; they used the power they had.

The x-mark is a contaminated and coerced sign of consent made under conditions

that are not of one's making. It signifies power and a lack of power, agency and a lack of agency. It is a decision one makes when something has already been decided for you, but it is still a decision. Damned if you do, damned if you don't. And yet there is always the prospect of slippage, indeterminacy, unforeseen consequences, or unintended results; it is always possible, that is, that an x-mark could result in something good. Why else, we must ask, would someone bother to make it? I use the x-mark to symbolize Native assent to things (concepts, policies, technologies, ideas) that, while not necessarily traditional in origin, can sometimes turn out all right and occasionally even good (*X-marks* 2-3).

In the case of Kyle and the writing from which he seems to be absent, Lyons would say Kyle is still demonstrating agency. Kyle could have refused to write papers, could have refused to make any effort to use the rewarded forms of grammar and punctuation. But he didn't. Obviously, Kyle made enough of the rewarded choices to earn his high school diploma and enroll in college. Actually, I would say that Kyle's high school graduation required daily decision-making in favor of a diploma; though he could have been waylaid by any combination of influences and distractions on the reservation, he wasn't. Kyle made the choices necessary to graduate, and to attend college, which he told me many of his peers did not do. Finally, Lyons would also point out that Kyle's choices created opportunities for him. As the reader will see, because Kyle assented with his x-mark earlier, he learned some new writing methods in college, and also returned to a use of writing unrelated to a teacher's expectations.

For another way of thinking about this, we can return to theoretical ideas of subjectivity. Kyle's use of language in the past changed who he was. His use of words

interacted with thousands of other “living dialogic threads,” in Bakhtin’s terms, and this changed language...and changed Kyle. As I see it, over the years, as his subjectivities shifted, with some fading and others gaining prominence, Kyle would have found himself “brushing up against” a constantly changing, living fabric of possibilities and demands. The intentionality of his words, to use Bakhtin’s term, took Kyle in new directions each time he used them, exposing his subjectivities to a new array of influences with every decision. Even though Kyle doesn’t recognize how he got to college, i.e. by making one small decision after another, he still retains the power of those choices. He just doesn’t know it yet.

Over the course of the semester in which Kyle took the Expressive Writing class, he wrote in ways that were different from those what he had experienced before. For example, Kyle explained in the interview at the end of the semester that freewriting was a new experience, and one that he found both useful and enjoyable. The following excerpt is from a part of the interview in which Kyle was explaining that it had become easier for him to come up with ideas for writing because of invention techniques he had learned in the class. I asked him for specifics about which techniques were helpful.

R: ...Tell me about um the freewriting. That was another technique that we worked on in class. Was that part of what was helpful? Or do you know?

K: Yeah, in a way. I mean it was fun to like just write down stuff on top of your head, right there and then. I never really did that before.

R: Ok.

K: Or, usually we’d have to like read something, and then give like response to it, but I like this, it’s more fun.

R: Ok.

K: It just made me think more on what I was, what my response would be, more than like research stuff.

We will return to Kyle's comparison of freewriting and research writing. For now, I want to notice that for Kyle, it was a new experience to write in class while paying attention to what he was thinking. In high school he wrote responses to readings, but those were his thoughts as related to some externally structured set of ideas.

Part of what Kyle seems to have learned by freewriting is that there can be a connection between paying attention to what he is thinking and writing those thoughts on paper. We know that such an experience is complex from a cognitive standpoint, and assume that the very act of paying attention to thoughts results in some kind of change in the thinking, as well as some degree of transformation occurring in the act of moving pencil on paper (or hands on the keyboard). Although understanding what we experience when freewriting is beyond the scope of this project, we can notice in this case study that Kyle said it was useful to him, he had not done it before, and it was fun.

I think it is particularly important to notice that Kyle said freewriting is fun. First, if we are enjoying an activity, we are more likely to sustain that activity and seek it out again. When a struggling writer has fun writing, I am interested because, generally speaking, the more words they generate, the more effective they will become as writers.

The second reason we need to pay attention to Kyle's comment about fun is because of the cultural emphasis for many American Indians on living with a sense of humor. Vizenor mentions a specific form of humor, teasing, in his definition of survivance. He writes, "The nature of survivance...is clearly observable in narrative

resistance and personal attributes, such as the native humanistic tease, vital irony, spirit, cast of mind, and moral courage (Aesthetics 1). While Kyle does not refer to this specific type of humor, I wonder if having fun with writing might create an opening for that cultural expression. If students can express their sense of humor through writing, whether teasing or otherwise, they might experience a deeper connection between culture and writing.

Further, that deepened connection would reverse a long-standing pattern of Indian narratives as only tragic tales, told seriously and without any trace of humor to humanize both what is lost and what remains. Vizenor says, “Too often, there is a tragic flaw in reason, and the wisdom learned by chance and adversities is lost to seriousness and the ‘hegemony of histories’” (*Manifest* 83). As a result, “The tribes are reduced to the tragic in the ruins of representation,” and their full humanity is denied. Vizenor argues, however, that “tragic wisdom endures, and is the source of trickster humor in the literature of survivance.”

The tribes have seldom been honored for their trickster stories and rich humor.

The resistance to tribal humor is a tragic flaw. Laughter over that comic touch in tribal stories would not steal the breath of destitute children; rather, children would be healed with humor, and manifest manners would be undermined at the same time (*Manifest Manners* 83).

When Kyle has fun with his writing, he undermines what he has learned so far about who writing is for, and how it should be done. In contrast to previous lessons about writing in response to a teacher’s goals and agenda, in freewriting, Kyle has the experience of noticing how his thoughts are connected to what he writes, and he enjoys the experience.

Not all of the four students indicated the same learning with freewriting; as with other patterns, students experience them differently. Renee said in her interview at the end of the semester that she didn't always like freewriting, because sometimes she just didn't know what to say about the topic. As the reader will see in another chapter, however, Renee does convey the experience of agency with writing in other ways. In fact, in Renee's writing, we can observe agency in the more overt form of resistance. For Kyle, though, his comments about thinking through freewriting establish the beginning of a pattern of greater involvement with personal writing than with academic writing.

This is where we will return to that last line of the interview transcript. In his statements about freewriting, Kyle said, "It just made me think more on what I was, what my response would be, more than like research stuff." On one level, this is obvious: research requires exploration of external sources, but freewriting requires students to think about their responses to something.

Yet, this becomes interesting when we think about it using the concepts of presence and absence. In other writing for school, Kyle learned that writing is something you do in response to the teacher, and it has little or nothing to do with him. He does not mention writing as something that has meaning or value to him outside avoidance of punishment. Yet when Kyle says freewriting made him "think more," he signals a different outcome of the learning process. When the experience is freewriting, writing becomes something that he is involved in, rather than absent from.

In his interview at the end of spring semester, after completing Expository Writing, Kyle reiterates his sense that expository writing is all about someone else's ideas, and not his own.

R: ...[W]hen you think about the writing that you did for Expressive, and the writing you are doing now for Expository, how is it, how is your actual writing different? What's your experience of writing?

K: Between the two classes?

R: Yeah. Yeah. How would you compare them?

K: I would say, I like Expressive better. ... Because, you know, with Expressive Writing, you express your own ideas, pretty much. You know, like based on your own experiences. And, Expository is more based on you know like reading other people's stories, and like, like debates you have to read. I don't have a problem with the debates, but it's like, I'm more interested in expressing stuff through my writing, I would say.

Kyle suggests that he feels less involved, less invested, in writing that is not directly related to him. His comments here reflect the same reduced involvement that I observed from him in the Expository Writing class itself. While he rarely missed the Expressive Writing class during the fall, Kyle was absent from Expository Writing more often than not during spring semester. Though there could be many reasons for this pattern, and it is not an unusual one for college students, Kyle's physical absence contributes to an overall pattern of decreased involvement with his writing in that class, in comparison to his writing fall semester. When he is no longer the literal subject of his writing, Kyle retreats.

Kyle does not seem to recognize the agency that Lyons would argue he has in these instances of writing within limited options. I think that Lyons would want Kyle to recognize that there are always constraints, at the same time that there are always choices. In the Expository Writing class, it is true that students were required to analyze other

people's ideas and compare and contrast different positions in a debate. Yet Lyons might push Kyle, and rightly so, to hone those skills because of the opportunities they would create later. In hindsight, I wish I had pointed out to Kyle that his work in that class would help him to analyze and debate on topics and in arenas that would benefit both him and his community.

Lyons would probably want to have the same talk with Jeff, because Jeff characterizes the difference between Expressive and Expository Writing classes in ways that are similar to Kyle's characterizations. That is, Jeff describes himself as more active and present in Expressive Writing. In his last interview, Jeff says more about how his experience in the Expressive Writing class compared to his experience in other writing classes.

J: All in all, [pause 1s] like, between my two favorite English classes would have to be High School English 3 or this one. ... Just because, this one, totally different, totally something I did not expect. I mean, I didn't expect college to be like, well, in this class, this class, anyway, this writing class, to be how it was. I expected it to be more about, "blah blah blah blah, do this, do this, do that, and get your paper."

R: Um hum.

J: Whereas, like [pause 2s] it wasn't.

R: What was it like?

J: It was more like, "here's your paper, here's the guidelines of what you have to do. Take your time, do whatever you need to do to get whatever you need from yourself onto whatever you're doing, and, you're at your own...."

R: Um hum

J: Basically [pause 2s] I felt as if we had [pause 1s] our own pace.

Rather than the imperatives he uses to characterize other writing classes, “do this, do that,” Jeff’s sentences describing assignments in Expressive Writing feature the pronoun “you.” Taking the teacher’s perspective, he forefronts the experience of the student, saying “do whatever you need to do to get whatever you need from yourself onto whatever you’re doing....” When Jeff says, “do whatever you need to do,” he indicates that he perceives an openness to the student’s decision about process. Similarly, Jeff’s use of the word “guidelines” further suggests that he feels like he can make some choices about what he writes; he is in charge. Finally, Jeff also uses the possessive, which indicates a sense of control, saying “your paper,” “your time,” and “your pace.”²¹ As he characterizes writing in this class, the paper and the process belong to the student.

At the end of spring semester and the Expository Writing class, Jeff states the same idea we heard earlier from Kyle, that the thinking he did in Expressive Writing was different from thinking in Expository Writing. In that last interview, I asked Jeff if he thought that taking Expressive Writing before Expository Writing was helpful to him. He said that it was, and then explained why he thought so.

²¹ It’s hard to know what to make of the time reference. Assignments did have due dates, including for each draft. Ben referred to deadlines in the class as a source of stress, and said that in his high school there was far less emphasis on deadlines than in college in general, and specifically in Expressive Writing. Other students in the class, not part of this study, commented that they appreciated having time in class to work on their writing, in part because it made them feel less rushed. For whatever reason, Jeff indicates that he felt like he made decisions related to time and writing in this class.

J: Simply because you don't need resources and all the other junk, because you know, you are your source. So, you sit down, and all you do is think for yourself.

What did I do that did this?

R: Um hum.

J: Whereas in Expository, it's kind of a step up, to where, no more "you."

Most of us would deny that the absence of the student is a "step up," and would reject this as a goal of our classes. This is true particularly in regard to American Indian students, who are far too often absent from our classes physically, let alone intellectually. Clearly, though, that is how Jeff experienced the assignments in Expository Writing, which were in fact pretty traditional academic writing. Jeff's characterizations of most writing for school make the teacher the active agent with power, while he, the student, disappears. However Jeff's learning in the Expressive Writing class seems to result in the sense that he can make choices about his writing, and it belongs to him.

Scott Lyons would tell Jeff, as he would tell Kyle, that the modern world requires all of us to make the best choices we can in difficult conditions, in order to create opportunities for the future. For American Indians, the context of colonization still requires an active response from them. Both Lyons and Vizenor would point to the ways in which Natives have not only chosen writing as a means of agency, but even used rhetorical constraints to write powerfully. Lyons gives several examples of how earlier Native writers practiced survivance by writing within a discourse in which they had to create their own presence.

Hence, during the removal era when the dominant discourse promoted an increasingly racialized notion of Indian unchangeability, writers such as William

Apess and Elias Boudinot constantly represented changeable Indians in their narratives. Likewise, at the turn of the twentieth century, when the dominant discourse dependably portrayed Indians as the “Zero of human society,” Gertrude Bonnin tenderly depicted Indians as extremely human indeed (25).

Although Kyle and Jeff are writing in college classes and not specifically about American Indians, I think Lyons and Vizenor would still challenge them to make their marks, so to speak. In the course that I describe in chapter five, Kyle and Jeff would learn that when they own the skills of the dominant discourse, they can influence that discourse. As Lyons says, “Discourses can always be appropriated and challenged, even if you have to don regalia to do it ... but they cannot be ignored” (25). In other words, to the extent that Kyle and Jeff continue to perceive and allow themselves to be absent from certain kinds of writing, they are choosing to restrict their own agency in the future.

Agents with Agendas

The capacity for agency implies an element of choice, the ability to choose a particular action. Rather than follow a predetermined course, people who are agents make decisions of their own. Kyle, Renee and Ben explain that they choose to write outside of class for personal purposes. In their writing history papers and in interviews, all three describe ways in which they use writing to manage emotions or gain insight. While there isn't a direct connection between this use of writing and the well-being of the community, this use of writing is not inconsistent with Vizenor's ideas about writing related to survivance. Vizenor writes, “The risks, natural reasons, and praise of visions are sources of personal power in tribal consciousness; personal stories are coherent and name individual identities within communities, and are not an obvious opposition to communal

values. The shadows of personal visions, for instance, were heard and seen alone, but not in cultural isolation or separation from tribal communities” (*Manifest* 57).

As I understand Vizenor, the fact that the students’ writing is personal does not mean that it is contrary, or even unrelated, to the communal. Instead, what is personal exists as part of the group; as a result, what is valuable for the person may also be valuable for the group. I would not argue that this is necessarily so; when Vizenor says, “personal stories...are not an obvious opposition to communal values,” I understand that an individual could tell a personal story that is harmful to the group. But the personal nature of the story is not what would determine the value or harm. As we look at the way that Kyle, Renee, and Ben use personal writing, we will see that the uses they describe are not contrary to communal values, and may even support them.

Kyle explained to me at the end of fall semester that he had begun to write again, on his own and for his own purposes. In the following excerpt, Kyle explains several changes he sees in himself, related to writing.

R: ...Do you feel like you’ve changed as a writer this semester?

K: Yeah! In a lot of ways. Pretty much. I’m not scared to show my writing to other people. I’m not [not sure of several words here] Like I write a lot more now. Like I have a journal and stuff I keep.

R: Did you do that before?

K: Yeah, I did that when I was younger, but, I kind of stopped after a while.

R: Huh.

K: I lost touch with writing, but now I’m starting up again. ...Like it helps me with my problems, I guess. My frustrations with school, and stuff.

R: ...What do you think happens when you write stuff in your journal?...

K: You just, you just feel better. Like, more weight's lifted off your shoulders, like you just, I don't know. It's just like talking to somebody but it's writing it down.

...

K: Yeah, like, like I'm gonna throw these away, but I like keeping them, like to one I wrote 3 or 4 years ago, I have pages full of, like in a notebook, like 20 pages full of whatever. And I like reading them, looking at stuff and like shaking my head, like, "that's retarded."

R: [laughs] So you like looking back at that?

K: [laughing] Yeah, I was like oh, glad I got through that! ...It's fun.

A number of things are interesting in this brief exchange. First, Kyle says that he has begun to write again, after having abandoned it. His return to writing occurs while he is taking an Expressive Writing class, and while he is engaged in a significant life transition, from high school to college. This is writing that Kyle initiates on his own, and uses for his own purposes. I think that Vizenor's postindian would have a decent chance of showing up in writing that is neither compelled nor evaluated by a teacher. To be sure, the teacher would still influence this writing in some way, because it's not as if Kyle can use language apart from the context of colonization. And it's not only in writing such as this that the postindian can appear. But as Vizenor suggests, survivance can be sly, surveying the "available means" as Aristotle recommends, and Kyle's means of survivance might appear more readily to him in writing he chooses on his own.

The second point we should notice is that Kyle uses his self-directed writing to deal with problems, including emotions such as frustration. He says that writing makes him feel better, which sounds like he experiences some cathartic relief. However, it is also possible that Kyle feels better because he does something other than simply release emotion. For example, in his writing Kyle may generate new insight about something he can do to change an uncomfortable situation, or he may, in the process of writing, recognize additional opportunities in regard to something about which he feels constrained. Further, Kyle explains that he reads the writing later in order to reflect on his life. He says that he has kept 20 pages or so from three or four years earlier, and when he rereads those pages, he feels good about having gotten through the difficult times he wrote about.

Vizenor says that “Survivance is a practice, not an ideology, dissimulation or a theory” (“Aesthetics” 11). Survivance is something that people do. I think that Kyle practices survivance when he uses writing to solve his problems. He is not only surviving those problems, letting off enough cathartic steam to get by until the next time. Instead, when he looks back at the writing and observes the distance between his current vantage point and the one he recorded, Kyle sees development. In that act of looking back, Kyle is using his writing as a measure of his own survivance.

Finally, we should notice that Kyle says using writing this way is fun. Kyle’s first comment about fun, discussed earlier in this chapter, was related to writing in class. But this comment is about writing outside of class. Kyle gets a kick out of seeing how he struggled with something from the vantage point of having lived through it and, presumably, from a situation that changed in some way. I want to point out that Kyle’s

optimism is fundamental to this use of writing. He writes now about his “frustrations with school and stuff” in part because he expects to be able to look at his problems later and laugh at himself. For Kyle, writing is a part of how he manifests hope for a better future.

Renee describes herself as using writing for escape and for reflection. In her writing history, she explains, “Sometimes I use writing as my getaway for just a second. This helps me pinpoint my flaws that come up too many times.” Renee’s need for a “getaway” suggests that writing provides some relief from stress or difficulty, which is similar to how Kyle uses writing to deal with frustrations. Also similar to Kyle, Renee’s comment points toward the use of writing for reflection, though her reflection seems to occur closer to the writing experience (rather than years later, like Kyle).

Renee didn’t talk about keeping a journal, or sharing her problems in writing with people who are close to her. But she did use writing to explain her strong feelings about words, and essentially to protest the way we use words in English classes, by giving her essay about them to me, her English teacher. Her behavior suggests that she wanted, at least this time, to use writing to deal with her emotions and, at the same time, take action with them. That action component distinguishes Renee’s writing from that of the others, and is the reason her work merits separate consideration within this project. While we can infer aspects of agency in the writing of Ben, Kyle and Jeff, and in this section we talk about the ways in which they used writing to change themselves, Renee’s writing goes beyond and actually demonstrates agency in the form of resistance.

Ben talks about writing in ways that are similar to both Renee and Kyle. Ben indicates that there is pleasure in writing for him, too. At some point in his life, Ben became a person who sometimes writes for no other reason than that writing is enjoyable.

He said in his interview, “Writing to me kind of comes easy you know. I enjoy doing it. Some people don’t. Sometimes, sometimes I enjoy it because I don’t have nothing better to do. So I just write some stuff, and so. Other times it can be kind of stressful, if there are deadlines.” However, while Ben will write sometimes simply because he wants to, other times he writes about things that trouble him.

When Ben writes about his problems, he sometimes shares the writing with his therapist, and sometimes his mother. Of course, therapeutic writing is distinct from college writing, and you will find no arguments for combining the two anywhere in this study. College writing teachers are not therapists, and our goals in college writing are quite different from those of psychotherapy. I include the information about Ben’s use of writing as therapy because it gives a fuller picture of Ben as someone who uses writing to create some change that he wants in his life.

Kyle, Renee and Ben all talked and wrote about how writing is a way for them to create some kind of change within themselves. Although the uses they mention are related to personal challenges or circumstances, which are not overtly social or communal, these students have established a pattern of using writing for change. In this sense, the students are using writing for survivance already.

While we are interested in what happens within the individual student, in a composition class developed with critical/cultural studies goals, we need to help students make connections between their own experiences and their cultural context. In the next section, the reader will see that the four students are already interested in the influence they might be able to exert on others around them.

Agency within Community

All of the students in this study expressed a desire to influence other people with their writing, and in some cases, they indicate their recognition of the shared agency in persuasion. Earlier in this chapter, we saw clearly in Ben's words that he wants to influence the way in which his community deals with drug addiction. As I explain in chapter four, Renee wrote one essay, in part, in order to influence me. In addition, Renee, Kyle and Jeff all expressed a specific desire for persuasive writing during their initial interviews. All four of the students are interested in using writing to create some kind of change relative to other people.

In the first interview with students, I asked which type of writing they most prefer, personal, informative, or persuasive. All three said first that they are interested in persuasive writing. In the excerpt below, Renee says first that she is interested in persuasive writing even though it is less familiar.²²

G: ...If you could choose your topics for essays in school, I'm curious which one of these three you would choose. First, personal topics. Second, informative topics. Third, persuasive.

Renee: I don't know. I want to say persuasive, but, I've only done like one persuasive topic before, I think, or two. Maybe personal, I'm better at personal things.

G: Ok.

Renee: Yeah. It would come easier for me, if it was personal.

G: I'm curious, what appeals to you about the persuasive paper?

...

²² In transcripts of interviews with Renee, I use her name and "G" for Gardner to distinguish the speaker clearly.

Renee: Well, I like getting people interested in like getting like my idea out to them and seeing if it, if it affects them or not, kind of. [pause 2s] That's how I see it.

G: Um hum. [pause 2s] But then you followed that up and said maybe personal.

Renee: Yeah.

G: What do you like about that kind of writing?

Renee: That it's just easier, 'cause it's personal, it just comes easier for me. So, yeah.

Renee is interested in influencing other people with her opinion. Her interest is not only in expressing her ideas, but specifically in seeing if her ideas affect other people. Her word choices are interesting because they imply some distance between her writing and her readers' responses. She says, "Well, I like getting people interested in like getting like my idea out to them and seeing if it, if it affects them or not, kind of." Getting her ideas out to readers reminds me of Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin's invitational style, a feminist rhetorical style in which the rhetor invites the audience to consider a particular point of view. Although Foss and Griffin maintain the purpose is not one of persuasion in the classical sense, the invitation is a way to make readers aware of perspectives they may not have considered. Renee's comments suggest a similar approach, though she is specifically interested in having some kind of effect.

Kyle also said he preferred the persuasive first and the personal second, and this is particularly interesting because he couldn't remember ever writing a persuasive paper. He said, "I think I might have once, but I'm not too sure." I asked what appealed to him about persuasive writing, and he said, "Seems like I put my two cents into it or

something.” His comments indicate that he wants to be part of the conversation. Unlike Renee, he didn’t mention a particular outcome of persuasion. Instead, he wants to participate in dialog, at least in a general sense; he wants his perspective to be included.

While Kyle was clear in his preference but unsure about the reason for it, Jeff was emphatic about his preference for persuasive papers. The transcript excerpt below illustrates his confidence in his skills, as well his understanding of how persuasion works. The excerpt begins right after I asked if he preferred to write essays that are personal, informative, or persuasive.

J: Definitely persuasive.

R: Ok.

J: Because, um [pause 1s] I’ve always kind of enjoyed writing persuasive papers, ‘cause I believe that when I’m arguing about something that I can make a very good argument. I’m not going to make it completely one-sided. In other words, I will be able to look at things from both point of views. And, I’m a very open-minded person, and, it’s kind of obvious when you can see things from both sides, and you know what’s what, what’s good and what’s bad. And if somebody is so stubborn to the point where, even if they see the facts set out before them, that they still don’t care, I have the feeling that um, being able to see both sides would really let you get through to them, maybe. Because, they’d get the sense, the feeling, that you’re not totally against them. You know, you’re kind of, you don’t take a side; you’re a neutral person. Then that [pause 1s] you know [pause 1s] I have a feeling, yeah, that would be very [pause 1s] interesting.

R: Mm.

J: But, the other two, um, what were they? Writing, personal, I don't care much for sharing my personal life. I mean, I'm kind of boring anyway, but, I mean, I'm a college student that's pretty blatantly it. Um, for the, what was the second one?

R: Informative. Factual.

J: Yeah. For the informative, I don't think I know enough about something to go and talk to somebody about something.

What is important to notice is Jeff's enthusiasm for persuasion, and confidence in his argumentation skills. What is particularly interesting here is Jeff's implication of an alliance with his reader (see Powell). When he says, "And if somebody is so stubborn to the point where, even if they see the facts set out before them, that they still don't care..." he recognizes that it is not enough to write well, to make a good case on paper—some people still won't be moved by what you say. In other words, he does not expect a cause-and-effect relationship between his words and what someone else thinks or does.

Instead, Jeff indicates his recognition of the need for an alliance between reader and writer when he says, "...I have the feeling that um, being able to see both sides would really let you get through to them, maybe. Because, they'd get the sense, the feeling, that you're not totally against them." In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Kenneth Burke theorizes *identification* as the way in which rhetors and audience members align themselves either for or against things in the social environment. Burke argues that when audience members identify with the rhetor, they persuade themselves to agree with the speaker or writer. In other words, the relationship between the rhetor and the audience is important, and depends on identification. Even though Jeff may have never heard of Kenneth Burke, he demonstrates an understanding of the principle of human relationships

that Burke was addressing. An ally has something in common with another person, and a reader who feels the writer is an ally would be more likely to identify with that writer. Not only is Jeff interested in persuasion through writing, but he already has strategies in mind for how he might be effective.

As we can see in their interview responses, Renee, Kyle and Jeff are all interested at least in the idea of persuasive writing, and Ben is interested in influencing his community. These students are clear about their desire to participate in conversation and influence other people, and they are attracted to the idea of doing those things with writing. Yet, they did no persuasive writing in their Expressive Writing class. There was no discussion of argumentation strategies or persuasive language choices; there was no intended audience outside of class members. The developmental model used by the program focused only on fluency and changes in the individual student's experience of writing, and did not include instruction in how to use writing in any way related to improving political inequities or material conditions for the students or anyone else.²³

In addition, persuasion is more nuanced than the students might think. With the loss of the unified self along with other Enlightenment ideas, we also lost a clear connection between rhetoric and change. For some, the postmodern condition of subjectivity signals a loss of agency. However, I think there is power in the fragmentation, as I explained earlier in the chapter. I believe these students are capable of influencing other people with every variant of their own subjectivity, as those variants come into play, recede, cooperate with other variants, and create new subjectivities. The students' capacity for influence might be limited only by their own array of subjectivities and the

²³ As I discuss elsewhere, this is a serious failure of a whole class devoted to personal writing.

complexity of the other people they encounter. In chapter five, I will describe an assignment in which students could recognize themselves as subjects with multiple and shifting layers. Though this will only reveal the proverbial “tip of the iceberg,” students will become more aware of their potential for influence through writing.

Conclusion

Both Ben and Gerald Vizenor are Ojibwe Indians from the White Earth Reservation in Minnesota. Though they are from different generations, their shared heritage suggests that Ben and Vizenor probably have experienced some of the same cultural influences. Scott Lyons, too, is Ojibwe from Minnesota, from nearby Leech Lake Reservation. Though Ben has never met Lyons or Vizenor (I asked), he has grown up in the same geographical area and probably with a few of the same stories and traditions. Even so, no one would assume they have a great deal in common. Yet there is one characteristic we know they share: they all refuse to tell a tale that is only tragic.

Each of them could, if they wanted. Vizenor was not quite two years old when his father was murdered, and fifteen years old when his stepfather died (Minnesota Historical Society). Lyons describes how he lost two cousins to suicide.

Right now I'm thinking of my two young Ojibwe cousins who committed suicide in the same year--one in his early twenties, the other barely approaching his teens--two deaths that might be attributed to a kind of self-hatred experienced by many Indian youths today who find themselves trapped in colonial wreckage: poverty, violence, a racist dominant culture that hates and excludes them (“Rhetorical Sovereignty” 461).

In one semester’s time, Ben lost three relatives because of the combination of drugs and

despair. For all three of these men, the grief could be staggering. Yet these are not victims.

Why are these not tragic stories? Though the losses are tragic, the stories are not over. The narrators are still telling their tales. Vizenor and Lyons, at least, have had time and opportunity to contextualize their losses and take a principled stance, rejecting the victim identity and using language as a means of influence.

At the time of this study, Ben was just 18 years old. Yet he already had joined Vizenor and Lyons in rejecting victimry. As Ben articulates in his essay, he believes that individuals can make the difficult choices that are required to change their lives. What Ben may be most uncertain about is what sort of role he could play in making changes happen. If Ben were to ask about that role, Vizenor might tell him a story, one featuring the trickster.

In his insistence on postindian presence, Vizenor asserts the certainty of that which cannot be defined, predicted or controlled by what we currently understand. While Franchot Ballinger likens the trickster to a subatomic particle, we might suggest another simile, and say instead that, like subjectivity, the trickster “defies final definition of time, place and character” (55). As Ballinger describes Vizenor’s use of the trickster figure, we can see that agency is one of his most important attributes. “[Vizenor] demonstrates that ultimately trickster is best experienced as a dramatization of event and process, not fixed in the amber of description. Trickster is, after all, always travelling, and we might add, almost in apposition, transgressing, becoming, transforming, making” (56). Agency is the –ing suffix in this description, the active presence that makes change possible, and perhaps even inevitable.

While Kyle, Jeff, Renee and Ben are socially constructed, complex beings with fragmented and shifting identities, they are also people with the power to recognize and choose their influence. Native writers in our classrooms are not simply victims of colonialism, racism, and poverty. Though they and their families have suffered, they are still actors, with agency. The complexity of their subjectivity even increases their available opportunities for and sites of power. As Natives, college students, people from certain geographic areas, with certain interests and commitments, encountering new information and experiences daily on the Internet as well as on campus, Indian students can be influential in practically limitless roles.

As I will explain in chapter five, I think we can help students notice the ways in which they are agents already, using writing to make changes within themselves and sometimes in relationship to other people. Working with American Indian rhetorical texts in dialog with other texts, and understanding their many options for influence because of multiple subjectivities, students can recognize the power that is available to them through writing.

Before we turn to pedagogy, though, we will look closely at Renee's use of language in chapter four. Renee already recognizes that language is powerful, and she demonstrates a clear understanding of how it can be used as a weapon, even while she skillfully uses it as a tool. More than a means of asserting her own agency, Renee uses language to write a narrative of resistance and survivance.

CHAPTER FOUR

SURVIVANCE AS RESISTANCE: RENEE USES HER WORDS, HER WAY

Writing is the weapon we bear as we go into the new world we did not want
(Diane Glancy 278).

For contemporary American Indians, tribally controlled schools can be sites for strengthening tribal identity and preserving tribal culture. Indian language classes, frequently taught by elders, are offered at many of these schools. Often, these classes are financed with federal grants, such as the “Grant program to ensure survival and continuing vitality of Native American languages” (US Code 42, chapter 34, subchapter VIII). The grants are designed to fund the implementation of a change in Indian education policy. In a dramatic reversal of earlier US policy, The Native American Languages Act of 1990 was established to “preserve, protect, and promote the rights and freedom of Native Americans to use, practice, and develop Native American languages” (Reyhner and Eder 137). But, why did we need an act of Congress to support Indian languages?

We needed an act of Congress because the United States government used English literacy as a weapon in the colonization of this country. Simply put, the English language was mandated as a substitute for Indigenous languages in the effort to dominate American Indians. Documentation is abundant, but one particularly clear piece of evidence comes from Thomas J. Morgan, Commissioner of Indian Affairs. In his 1889 Annual Report, Morgan insisted that Indigenous Americans surrender their language and

culture. He explains in his Annual Report that he has "...a few simple, well-defined, and strongly-cherished convictions," including the following:

The Indian must conform to "the white man's ways," peaceably if they will, forcibly if they must. They must adjust themselves to their environment, and conform their mode of living substantially to our civilization. This civilization may not be the best possible, but it is the best the Indians can get. They can not escape it, and must either conform to it or be crushed by it. ... The tribal relations should be broken up, socialism destroyed, and the family and the autonomy of the individual substituted. The allotment of lands in severalty, the establishment of local courts and police, the development of a personal sense of independence, and the universal adoption of the English language are means to this end (177).

While some might hope that Morgan's report is merely history, Scott Lyons explains that US policies of English for assimilation continue to shape reality for many Indian students today. Writing in 2001, Lyons says, "The effects of this history have created identity crises, feelings of inadequacy, bitterness towards schooling, marginalization, disempowerment, and...negative attitudes about the technology of alphabetic writing in English" (255). The students who participated in this study seemed to experience the last effect, in particular. For all four, writing was not always negative, but when they discussed their experiences in school, English classes tended to be sources of frustration. As I discuss elsewhere in this project, the positive reports students did make were nearly all related to writing that had a personal connection for them. In contrast, nearly all the writing they did in school was associated with someone else's rules, ideas, and standards. Such writing had far less value to them. Renee, Jeff, Kyle and Ben talked about writing in

school as originating outside of them and being used for concerns unrelated to them.

Thus, their literacy education had been unrelated to their tribal identity or preservation of culture. In the view of J. Elspeth Stuckey, this disconnection between literacy and culture is a violent—and permanent—rupture.

Stuckey argues that literacy is always used to separate the powerful from the powerless, and to separate the powerless from any means of generating influence. In *The Violence of Literacy*, Stuckey explains how English education is used to mark and enforce boundaries of race and especially class. She says that people with economic power decide who gets access to literacy, as well as how much. In addition, the dominant class determines which subjects, styles, and forms are acceptable uses of literacy, as well as how much deviation from these standards will be allowed. When people become literate, they at least have to act as if they accept this determination of what is and is not acceptable. In Stuckey's theory of literacy, language is a weapon used to create and control access to power, especially economic power. Morgan's language in his Annual Report reveals the violence he intends: Indians must conform or be crushed; they cannot escape; tribes will be broken up and destroyed; "and the universal adoption of the English language [is one of the] means to this end." Stuckey's theory of literacy as violence must be taken seriously.

However, many Americans would prefer to ignore the destructive potential of literacy, because we like to think that education is the means by which people cross boundaries and improve the conditions of their lives. In the American Dream, young people of each generation develop knowledge and resources beyond those of their parents. They get more education, work at better jobs, and experience greater financial stability

and security. Thus, as the daydream goes, Stuckey might say, both individuals and society benefit when people conform to the literacy standards imposed by the dominant class.

This dream of progress disappears when we examine the real conditions of people's lives, Stuckey argues. Literacy standards imposed by the dominant class do not create opportunities for oppressed groups; they reinforce the separation of power. In the case of Native Americans, literacy in English has been a priority for the US government. Yet the real conditions of life on reservations suggest that conforming to literacy standards has not helped the Lakota or Ojibwe. The poverty rate on Standing Rock Sioux Reservation is 33.6% for families and 39.2% for individuals (US Census). In comparison, the poverty rate in North Dakota overall is 8.3% for families and 11.9% for individuals. On White Earth Reservation in Minnesota, 15.9% of families and 20% of individuals lived below the poverty level in 1999. In comparison, 5.1% of families and 7.9% of individuals in Minnesota lived below the poverty level. These statistics suggest that Stuckey is right: literacy is not a bridge from the land of Less to the land of More. Instead, literacy is the means by which territories are defined and defended. In this way, Stuckey claims, the creation and monitoring of literacy boundaries are acts of violence.

The violence of literacy is the violence of the milieu it comes from, promises, recapitulates. It is attached inextricably to the world of food, shelter, and human equality. When literacy harbors violence, the society harbors violence. To elucidate the violence of literacy is to understand the distance it forces between people and the possibilities for their lives (94).

Rather than functioning as a bridge, literacy functions as a means of separation, and

enables the ongoing inequality of resources and opportunities. In Stuckey's view, English teachers are active oppressors rather than innocent, powerless bystanders. "What we have to see...is how literacy is a weapon, the knife that severs the society and slices the opportunities and rights of its poorest people" (118). If Stuckey is right, then we are criminals and colonizers all. Yet, Stuckey admits that literacy can function otherwise.

She acknowledges that literacy can be part of a just society, and it can be used to help create that justice. Stuckey writes that we can do this if we remember that we are interdependent social beings.

We are not just private individuals in whose private minds the printed word works powerful deeds. We are, to be sure, natural individuals, but we are social before we are born, and the commerce we do with literacy is always, fundamentally, social.

We are arranged by our relations to literacy, to how and why literacy is produced, and to the effects of what literacy is about (95).

If we, as English teachers, recognize and investigate and transform our roles in regard to literacy, then it is possible that literacy might not be a weapon in our classrooms.

However, this is a big "if," and Stuckey seems pessimistic about the prospect.

Stuckey is pessimistic for two reasons. The first is her belief that literacy is more powerful when used for inequality than it is when used for justice. The power of literacy is institutionalized in order to oppress.

The truth is that literacy and English instruction can hurt you, more clearly and forcefully and permanently than it can help you, and that schools, like other social institutions, are designed to replicate, or at least not to disturb, social division and class privilege (123).

Simply put, privileged forms of literacy are key tools in the building and maintenance of the master's house, to use the terms of the debate between Henry Louis Gates and Audre Lorde. Like Lorde, Stuckey does not believe that the master's tools can be used to dismantle his house. Instead, the use of those tools, i.e. reading and writing within parameters set by the dominant culture, perpetuates the very structure of oppression.

Second, Stuckey is pessimistic about literacy as anything other than a weapon because of funding issues. She acknowledges that some English teachers understand the way in which literacy perpetuates injustice, and some of those teachers have at times designed special programs to address the problem. She acknowledges, "These English teachers save many students." Yet she goes on to argue, "But they do not save enough. And when the special money that funds the special programs runs out, the savings account is closed" (124). My own university may be a case in point. Although multiple reasons have been given for closing the program in which these four students enrolled, the school and the state are in a financial crisis. Sacrifices must be made. As always, the sacrifices are made first by the poor and the disenfranchised. In the immediate case of this university, Stuckey seems to be right. Literate activity by the "haves" is used to justify yanking literacy opportunities from the "have nots."

Yet I question how little allowance Stuckey makes for the power of oppressed people. It seems to me that Stuckey offers an excellent analysis of literacy as violent, but neglects the possibility that the receivers of that violence can learn how to use the weapon themselves, for their own purposes. Deborah Brandt offers an alternate framework for considering the power dynamics of literacy. In "Sponsors of Literacy," Brandt outlines how literacy has been used and transformed as a consequence of

economic activity, and explains how, throughout that history, those with economic power have fulfilled the role of sponsors. She explains, “Sponsors, as I have come to think of them, are any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way” (166). These sponsors alternately give and withhold opportunities for literacy development in order to increase their own economic power.

Although the interests of the sponsor and the sponsored do not have to converge (and, in fact, may conflict) sponsors nevertheless set the terms for access to literacy and wield powerful incentives for compliance and loyalty. Sponsors are a tangible reminder that literacy learning throughout history has always required permission, sanction, assistance, coercion, or, at minimum, contact with existing trade routes (167).

Brandt’s notion of sponsorship seems compatible with Stuckey’s ideas about the violence of literacy, in that literacy access is motivated by economic gain for those who are already powerful. Yet Brandt also sees ways in which “the sponsored” have appropriated literacy and used it as a tool for their own purposes.

Brandt describes two working class women who were employed as secretaries in the 1960s. They took what they learned on the job about rhetoric and finance in order to improve their own lives. The first woman, Carol White, is an Oneida Indian. As a secretary for a Catholic missionary agency, she typed and proofread both letters and magazine articles for one of the Vice Presidents of the company. In doing this work, she noticed his rhetorical strategies for creating interest and persuading his reading audience. She applied what she learned to the furtherance of her own interests, which include the

work of Jehovah's Witnesses. The other woman learned how to manage a household budget from working with her employer's financial statements, among other skills.

In Brandt's terms, both women appropriated literacy for their own goals. Stuckey might argue that these uses do not constitute literacy for freedom, but instead, merely perpetuate the violence. She might say that proselytizing for any religion and participating more effectively in a capitalist market simply repeat "the violence of the milieu" in which the literate acts were learned. However, Stuckey would be neglecting the very real, embodied facts of everyday life that critical literacy theory urges us to consider (see Freire, Giroux). The real power of politics to organize our lives does not negate our human needs. Food, shelter and medical care are fundamental to quality of life, and the women who appropriated the literacy of their male supervisors became more able to provide significant material goods and opportunities to their families. As I see it, rejecting the value of appropriated literacy also rejects the humanity of those who use it. People in oppressed groups are not objects that are acted upon; they are agents who are simultaneously interacting with their sponsors and others who are sponsored.

In fact, Brandt argues that literacy always includes an exchange of literate materials and strategies, which is quite different from Stuckey's concept of literacy that is imposed. Brandt explains that literacy "accumulates" across generations, classes, and other groups, with exchanges in both directions. In addition, she states that rapid changes in technology are accelerating changes in literacy to such a degree that the literate must constantly adapt to new materials and strategies. She says, "[T]he transformation of literacy obtained in one context for use in another was a principal strategy of literacy learning among the people I interviewed and a hallmark of advancing literacy," requiring

all of us “to adapt and improvise and amalgamate” (Accumulating 660). In fact, Brandt’s concept of “accumulating” literacy seems quite similar to her concept of “appropriation” of literacy. Both refer to the transfer of literate materials and strategies between groups, while appropriation is specific to the receipt of literacy by the sponsored. The difference is economic motivation.

However, although sponsors’ economic needs are the primary motivator for literacy control, they are not the only factor involved in literacy changes. Brandt argues that literacy is far too complex to be controlled completely by the dominant class, and that complexity creates opportunities for appropriation.

The uses and networks of literacy crisscross through many domains, exposing people to multiple, often amalgamated sources of sponsoring powers, secular, religious, bureaucratic, commercial, technological. In other words, what is so destabilized about contemporary literacy today also makes it so available and potentially innovative . . . Another condition favorable for appropriation is the deep hybridity of literacy practices extant in many settings. . . . [W]orkplaces, schools, families bring together multiple strands of the history of literacy in complex and influential forms (“Sponsors” 179).

If Brandt’s theory about the power dynamics inherent in literacy is more complete than Stuckey’s theory, then Compositionists need not abandon hope. The acceleration and deepening of multiple literacies may be creating more opportunities for American Indians to appropriate literacy for their own purposes. One might expect that such acceleration and deepening would also add layers of complexity to those Indians’ experiences with literacy, and such is the case with Renee.

As I described in chapter two, Renee's interests in writing can be understood as personal, relational, and reflective. The essay we will work with closely in this chapter does not contradict those themes; rather, her essay expands and complicates the relational theme, in particular. Renee's essay is a dialogic response to some writing of mine that I had shared with the class. She explains in this essay that language is destructive and she wishes she could reject it. In a number of respects, this is unlike Renee's other comments during the study. Except for her "This I Believe" essay, Renee's comments about language and writing typically ranged from neutral to positive statements, especially regarding the personal, relational, and reflective themes. However, in the essay we will work with in this chapter, Renee reveals how problematic language can be for her personally. Most of the time, she indicates that language is problematic because of how other people use it within relationships, but sometimes words can also a problem when she is unable to use them in the way that she wants.

Her interests in writing remain personal, relational, and reflective. Yet what Renee explains about language is that words feel personally threatening and alienating because of the ways in which people use them against each other. This is true at the same time that Renee also likes to use writing to express her feelings, reflect on situations, and create understanding with her readers. Even within this one essay, Renee makes contradictory claims, and we can understand these as representing the complexity of her experience with language. Renee's experience of literacy is as complex as her subjectivities. As if to demonstrate that fact, Renee used words in English to write an essay protesting the way language is used to harm and control, thereby resisting that very control and asserting the power of her own words.

In her essay about words, Renee offers us an opportunity to perceive both the violence of literacy and the power with which Renee uses literacy for her own purposes. While Stuckey wrote about the violence of literacy in a figurative sense, Renee experiences words themselves as dangerous, and she is afraid of them. However, Renee also reveals ways in which she uses literacy to resist oppression. Renee's resistance occurs in the act of appropriating her sponsor's literacy, to use Brandt's terms. Ironically, Renee is using written language to protest the violence of words. If words are weapons, then Renee uses them to defend herself and to fight back.

As I have explained elsewhere in this project, Gerald Vizenor and others refer to writings like Renee's as narratives of survivance. Survivance is a complex term fulfilling many functions, but it is a term of action. The concept it conveys is also easily recognized. Vizenor claims, "The nature of survivance is unmistakable in native stories, natural reason, remembrance, traditions, and customs and is clearly observable in narrative resistance and personal attributes, such as the native humanistic tease, vital irony, spirit, cast of mind, and moral courage. The character of survivance creates a sense of native presence over absence, nihility, and victimry" ("Aesthetics" 1). Survivance narratives may reveal a history of pain and struggle, but they are written from strength, for purposes of recovery, power and transformation for both the individual and for the community. According to Vizenor, the language of the colonizer may be used for freedom.

If Vizenor is correct, then Stuckey's pessimism about literacy cannot be justified. Stuckey claims that literacy violently separates people from what might otherwise have been possible for them. In contrast, Vizenor denies that literacy's power can only destroy. In his view, Natives are present, powerful, active, and engaged. They are not victims of

literacy's violence. Instead, Natives can use literacy to create survivance and to write survivance narratives. They can appropriate the sponsor's literacy for their own purposes, in Brandt's terms. If English education is used to mark and enforce boundaries of race and class, then Vizenor would say those boundaries are simulations. The boundaries have no referent in reality, while Indians are using "stealth and cultural irony in the simulations of absence in order to secure the chance of a decisive presence in national literature, history, and canonry." Vizenor would say that the power of the dominant group to create those boundaries is an illusion, and that Natives are using the appearance of those boundaries to discover what is possible and then make it real. The theoretical ideas about literacy discussed by Stuckey, Brandt, and Vizenor can be tested against the actual writing of the four students in this case study. In this chapter, we look at what Renee's words suggest about her own literacy.

Renee wrote an essay that appears at first to illustrate Stuckey's ideas about the violence of literacy. As I will explain in detail a little later in the chapter, the assignment was to write about a belief, and Renee chose to describe her beliefs about words. Most of the time, Renee describes words as having destructive power, and suggests that she feels powerless. In her explanation of what she believes about words, Renee even uses terms related to violence, seeming to affirm Stuckey's pessimism. As I will show, however, Renee's essay is ultimately a survivance narrative. The power she perceives in words is a power that she can and does use. Renee's use of irony is one example of that power, and one that clearly establishes her essay as one of survivance.

Renee's essay is also a dialog, both internal and external, within which she uses words to "come to consciousness." These terms are specific to Mikhail Bakhtin and the

theory he describes in “Discourse of the Novel” and other essays. Bakhtin’s theoretical discussion of language in the novel also has much to offer to the present study of student writing, and I will apply some of his ideas to that writing, including heteroglossia, dialogism, authoritative voice and internally persuasive discourse. Briefly, Bakhtin uses the term heteroglossia to discuss the multiple voices or languages within an individual or within a text. In a novel, the character, the theme, and the plot may all represent or concretize different selves or aspects of selves within the author. In an individual, the multiple languages arise from multiple identities, shaped by memberships in social groups and our roles within authoritative (or the dominant) discourse. When those multiple voices in one individual engage with the multiple voices in another individual, the individuals are engaged in dialog on many levels, which may include literal dialog but always includes interaction between the unspoken and perhaps unseen influences on the individual’s language. Internally persuasive discourse is the partial assimilation of words from authoritative discourse, so that the words we use become partially our own.

Holly Baumgartner has used these concepts to discuss Native American autobiographical literature. In “De-assimilation as the Need to Tell,” Baumgartner describes how Bakhtin’s ideas can be used to understand what happens when Natives write about their own lives. She writes, “Through Bakhtin's notions of heteroglossia, dialogism, and internally persuasive discourse (as opposed to authoritative discourse), Native American autobiographies may be shown as texts which include an awareness of the multivocality of any writing” (133). Baumgartner argues that this multivocality highlights “...the univocality of authoritative discourses, undermining and destabilizing them, and ultimately beginning a process of de-assimilation and empowerment, a kind of

coming to consciousness.”

While I appreciate Baumgartner’s application of Bakhtin’s theory, I have trouble accepting the term and goal of “de-assimilation” that she uses. She describes de-assimilation as a reversal of the acculturation process, and seems to imply that the process returns Natives to some kind of authentic state, before acculturation. However, I assume it is not possible for any person to lose parts of the self that are inflected by society, that individuals are always comprised of multiple and sometimes conflicting subjectivities. And in fact, Baumgartner says as much by drawing attention to multivocality as a feature in Indian autobiography, which she discusses throughout her essay. In consequence, her use of the term de-assimilation is puzzling to me. Even so, Baumgartner identifies useful concepts from Bakhtin for understanding what is happening in autobiographical texts by Native Americans.

As I have discussed in chapter two, the student writing I am working with in this study is not autobiographical, per se. The self is the source for all of the student writing in the study, but not all of the writing is about the self. Though students often write about their experiences and thoughts, their rhetorical situation is not a literary one. That is, they are writing for a class, developing specific writing skills while using material that is personally relevant. However, when I apply Bakhtin’s theory to Renee’s essay, I see many of the same things that Baumgartner sees in Native American autobiography.

For example, Baumgartner notices that Natives writing autobiography “often exploit the heteroglossic nature of language as a means of identifying the various socially constructed voices that are linked through assimilation” (137). This is similar to what Bakhtin describes happening in the novel, where narrators, characters and themes speak

in different voices or languages, all coming from the author. Baumgartner argues that when Natives name and speak in all those languages, they have an opportunity to renegotiate the “cultural splits” such as mixedblood identity and variations of Native culture. Speaking against any attempt to unify those voices, she argues instead that they should be “set loose to play” (139). As I will demonstrate further on, Renee also writes in multiple voices or languages, and if Bakhtin’s theory holds true, then writing her essay may enable Renee to transform authoritative discourse into internally persuasive discourse. We will work more closely with these ideas later in the chapter, as we encounter relevant passages. For now, I want to describe the assignment to which Renee was responding.

Renee wrote her essay in response to an assignment in which she was asked to describe a belief she has, including how she came to believe what she does and how that belief shapes her life. The assignment was modeled on a public radio program entitled “This I Believe,” which now functions as a nonprofit organization. The following description is from the website for the organization itself:

This I Believe is an international organization engaging people in writing and sharing essays describing the core values that guide their daily lives. More than 90,000 of these essays, written by people from all walks of life, are archived here on our website, heard on public radio, chronicled through our books, and featured in weekly podcasts. The project is based on the popular 1950s radio series of the same name hosted by Edward R. Murrow.

The assignment Renee responded to was modeled on the free curricula offered to educators by “This I Believe.” Essentially, students were asked to write a 4-5 page essay

about something they believe in. They needed to explain their belief by telling their reader about a related experience. The emphasis was on developing ideas using the common strategies of storytelling, compare and contrast, process analysis, definition and description.

Students had two additional options for the essay. In contrast to the usual “This I Believe” essays, which are almost all nonreligious but mostly positive, students were welcome to describe a belief in something negative. That part of the assignment reads as follows:

Option #2 Write the same type of essay, but choose a belief in something negative rather than the usual “heartwarming” subjects of the NPR series. The writing task is the same, no matter what the focus is: explain a belief by telling your reader about an experience, i.e. developing and demonstrating by using sensory detail, active voice, and elements of story (setting, character development, etc.). So, for example, someone who believes that most people are incurably greedy could describe an experience that created the belief or helped him recognize that he believes this (the day his pastor was convicted of embezzling church funds, or the day his mother encouraged him to cheat the carnival worker who gave him change for a \$10 bill instead of the \$5 bill that he exchanged for cotton candy).²⁴

²⁴ The third option for student writers was to write the same type of essay, but from the perspective of a fictional character. This option read as follows: “Write the same type of essay, but from the perspective of a fictional character. For example, you could write about Batman in the movie “Batman Begins” (2005). You could describe the character as having the belief that people are empowered by facing their fears. In your essay, you could write about how, as an adult, Bruce Wayne returned to the cave where he was traumatized by bats as a child and discovered the literal place from which he could launch his campaign to rid Gotham City of evil.”

In class, we looked at sample essays, including one written by Joy Harjo (Muskogee Creek). We also looked at a draft of some writing I had done, and discussed how it could be revised to become a “This I Believe” essay.

I bring my own writing into class on occasion with the goal of demonstrating to students, first of all, that often writing doesn’t look very good at the beginning, though just as often it can be crafted into something worthwhile later. I also think it is important to be present as a writer in my writing class, not merely as an authority figure telling students how to write. The previous summer, I had done some writing while on vacation. The writing was simple musing, thinking on paper about personal writing while planning this study. The day’s writing was about a belief, though, so I brought it into class and offered it as a draft that could be revised into a “This I Believe” essay. I asked students to suggest ways that I could revise the paper, and in the discussion I added thoughts of my own about how it could improve. (If I had only followed the students’ revision instructions, though, it would have been a fine “This I Believe essay. They had good suggestions.)

In my musing about personal writing, I explicitly identified my belief that writing can be powerful. I will include part of the draft below, because I think it is relevant to Renee’s essay.

I know that writing can be powerful for several reasons. One, it can be cathartic, and that may have value. Once something is on paper, it becomes an entity, a thing that can be studied and crafted. This process creates distance between mind and emotion. Distance creates an opportunity for us to make decisions, to sort through the pieces and see the relationships between them in new ways. Distance

can help us be creative in our problem solving. Or maybe we don't need to solve a problem, but we can understand something differently, and change our relationship with that thing, maybe give it a new place in our minds or resolve to try to adapt in healthier ways to a reality we cannot change.

The power of writing that I know least about as a writer, anyway, is the power to affect other people. Written words can change readers. As a reader, I have experienced the transformative power of language. Books were a great escape for me, growing up. I would have grown up quite happy living in a library.

This morning, when I walked, I thought about writing. Writing makes me more alive. It makes my brain more alive. The idea of writing, just thinking about writing, makes me feel more alert and engaged. I need to write to live. I am still not much of a talker. Never have been. I continue to be more comfortable thinking on paper, on a keyboard, with printed words. Maybe it is simply a habit of mind that I created when I was young; for so many years, I wrote and wrote and wrote and wrote.

Students expressed surprise about seeing something that I wrote, especially because it was something informal, unfinished and somewhat personal. I cannot know, though, whether many in the class were interested in my thoughts about writing. Renee, however, may have paid more attention to the subject than I had imagined any student would. I don't know whether Renee intended for her essay to be a response to the writing I shared

with the class, but it certainly can be read that way. In a sense, she and I engaged in written dialog.

Bakhtin theorizes that all of our words, whether spoken or written, are generated within the context of a dialog. He explains, “The living utterance . . . cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue” (“Discourse” 276-77). Further, Bakhtin is sure that all of our words are spoken or written with the expectation that there will be a response. Someone, somewhere, will have something to say about what we have said.

The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer's direction. Forming itself in an atmosphere of the already spoken, the word is at the same time determined by that which has not yet been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word. Such is the situation in any living dialogue (“Discourse” 280).

Just as we experience this mutuality in verbal conversation, Bakhtin claims that we also experience it in writing. We expect that someone will read what we have written, and that this someone will have something to say about our utterance. While I did not intend to initiate a dialog with Renee about the power of words, we are not in control of what happens when we make our utterances. People perceive and respond to our words in ways that are shaped by the heteroglossia of their own language systems; the meaning of my utterance depends upon my reader’s age, profession, ethnicity, class, and religion, among other influences. Part of the exigency for this study is that Indian students and

non-Indian teachers in a writing classroom are communicating in a contact zone with a lack of awareness, let alone understanding, about the complexity of the communication in which they are engaging. We engage in dialog with students, both spoken and written, without understanding the culturally inflected heterogeneity of our language. As Renee makes abundantly clear in her essay, her understanding about words is quite different from mine.

In response to the “This I Believe” assignment, Renee wrote an essay about words, with the title “Overrated.” In retrospect, I can see that she is responding, on some level, to what I wrote about my own belief about words. I do not claim that Renee was doing this intentionally; rather, I assume that my words joined the myriad other words she has heard and conversations she has engaged in. Bakhtin describes the way in which one person’s words become part of a larger, social dialog.

Along with the internal contradictions inside the object itself, the prose writer witnesses as well the unfolding of social heteroglossia *surrounding* the object, the Tower-of-Babel mixing of languages that goes on around any object; the dialectics of the object are interwoven with the social dialogue surrounding it. For the prose writer, the object is a focal point for heteroglot voices among which his own voice must also sound . . . (“Discourse” 278).

My words, then, merged with dialogs already in progress for Renee. Within Renee’s own “Tower-of-Babel mixing of languages,” one sentence of mine may have been louder than the others. I wrote, “The power of writing that I know least about as a writer, anyway, is the power to affect other people.” Renee’s essay is, in part, a dialogic response in which she informs me about the power that writing has to affect her. Although I can’t know

what her intentions were, conscious or otherwise, I certainly can learn about the power that writing, and words more generally, have had to affect Renee. More important yet, I can also learn about ways that Renee exerts power using her own words.

Renee's "This I Believe" essay is structured according to the second option for the assignment. Rather than describing a heartwarming belief, Renee describes a "negative" or contrary belief, one that comes from painful or otherwise difficult experiences. Through her words, we understand that Renee has experienced the violence of literacy in English; through her actions, we understand that she is resisting that violence.

Before I begin describing Renee's essay, I would like to briefly discuss the way in which I am writing about the "I" in student writing and the "I" in how students refer to themselves. Data for this study include interactions with the students, observation, interviews, and student writing. It is relatively straightforward for me to report on and discuss something students said or did as words or actions coming from the students themselves. This is true even though I fully acknowledge the complexity of individuals. We refer to a person as having or being a whole self, even if many of us acknowledge that the "self" is actually comprised of multiple subjectivities, all with varying, and sometimes competing, needs and goals and ideas. While this is relatively simple to deal with in regard to words spoken by students, it is more complex with their written words.

One of the challenges of personal writing is that the "I" in any piece is unclear. When we are reading fiction, we readily understand that there is no necessary or overt connection between the narrator and the author. However, when we read autobiographical or personal writing, we understand that the author intends to make an

explicit connection between himself or herself and the “I” in the text. Yet, even when we read writing that is autobiographical, we can assume that the “I” is only a fragment of the author’s “self” (see Faigley). The author has chosen specific scenes, words and examples in order to create a particular version of himself or herself on the page. That version of the “author-on-the-page” is represented by Renee and the other student writers with the pronoun “I,” but I recognize that the “I” is a snapshot, giving us a glimpse of the author for one moment, from one perspective. The “I” does not constitute the complex human being using the pronoun, and should be understood as partial.

Renee explains her belief that words are both dangerous and inadequate, and unnecessary yet required. In the first part of my discussion of her essay, I will describe how Renee began, what she said next, how that relates to her next sentences, and so on. By doing this, the reader will understand the back-and-forth nature of the essay, the way in which Renee juxtaposes ideas that conflict, sometimes dramatically.

The sharp turns that Renee sometimes makes from one sentence to the next illustrate the very real presence of multiple voices within her text, including historical voices. The idea of a unified self that is capable of speaking in one voice is no longer credible (see Faigley). Instead, a postmodern understanding of self and voice includes the assumption that we can be of no fewer than two minds at once. That is, our identities are complex, with sometimes conflicting manifestations of the intersections between influences, needs, and goals. Renee’s inclusion of conflicting sentiments and ideas suggests that she may recognize and accept the simultaneity of her own divergent subjectivities. Whether or not this is conscious for Renee, she allows the sharp edges of contradiction to remain in the essay.

In the first two sentences, Renee explains how words can hurt, even unintentionally. She begins, “Sometimes different people take offense to words that others say and mean in a totally different way. Some people do not mean to sound derogatory or demeaning in any way but others could easily mistake it for those terms.”²⁵ In these first two sentences, Renee seems to divide responsibility for language problems between the person using the words and the person interpreting the words. My observations of Renee suggest that she is a person who wants to be fair to other people, and I believe that characteristic is reflected in these sentences. She realizes that the damage wrought by words is not always or necessarily intentional. Her underlying claim is that words are powerful and cannot be completely controlled by the person who uses them. Brandt would agree with Renee on this point, because she argues that literacies are enacted within a complex network of other literacies, and one cannot always (or even often) foresee how they will be used in different contexts. However, Brandt might also point out that this could be advantageous for Renee.

Renee continues with a definition of her terms. She explains, “When I say Derogatory I mean people using words to lower others below them and when I say Demeaning I mean degrade a person verbally.” Renee is describing the way in which words are used to create power and status differentials. Words create inequality of status; they are the vehicle of power, the means of changing one person’s position in relation to another. Thus, right at the beginning of her essay, Renee indicates that words are a tool for harming other people. In fact, words can be something like a weapon.

²⁵ I omitted the customary use of *sic* in all student writing, because using it would create awkward or, in some cases, nearly unreadable text because of frequent surface errors.

In her next sentence, Renee reveals a sensitivity to the contextual nature of language. “In actuality, it all comes down to how you use them and whom you say them to.” In my experience, many people act as if words have fixed and literal meanings. However, Renee already understands that communication is rhetorical. The meaning of words will change, depending on who is using them, who is interpreting them, and the context in which the words are used. Renee’s awareness of the rhetorical nature of words is what allows her to write a survivance narrative, rather than a victim’s tragedy. She writes knowing that an English teacher will be reading her statement of resistance to language. The audience and context are what distinguish Renee’s text from mere complaint or catharsis.

Renee’s next sentence is probably the thesis for her essay, though I didn’t ask for a thesis in the assignment. Her use of the thesis demonstrates how well she has already learned the “rules” that she refers to later on. She writes, “I, personally, do not like using much words but its how I have to get by in society.” The ideas in this sentence are fundamental to the whole essay. Renee does not like using words, but she needs to use them to get enough of whatever it is that she does want. In a later essay for class, the “Age 70” paper, Renee describes her desire for a career, a family, and a home in a large city. Her goals in that essay, which I will discuss later in the chapter, seem to reveal optimism about the future, as a result of sustained and self-directed effort. In this essay, though, in the context of her beliefs about words, I notice that Renee uses the phrase “get by.” Those words imply a marginal kind of success, one that is achieved in spite of something else, and perhaps a success that is achieved by “going around” some obstacle.

When she writes that she needs words “to get by in society,” even though she doesn’t want to use words, Renee conveys a sense of limited power or agency.

In fact, Renee writes that she has no real choice about the matter at all. Although she acknowledges such a choice is conceivable, the consequences of that choice are unacceptable to her. Renee explains, “By this I mean that if I did not use words in today’s everyday life, things would get complicated and I more than likely wouldn’t get anywhere because of the ‘non-usage’ of words and if that’s the way to go then I guess I have no other choice.” In this statement, Renee seems to feel powerless in regard to society’s demand that she use words. She can either have a complicated reality in which she doesn’t get anywhere, or she can use words to get what she wants and needs. Lisa Delpit offers an important discussion of the real power available to women and students of color when they learn how to use the dominant discourse. I will work closely with her ideas later in this chapter, but in this part of her essay, Renee seems to be in full agreement with Delpit’s insistence that there is power in learning to use “the master’s tools.” In Stuckey’s terms, Renee recognizes the price of defying conventions for literacy that have been established by the dominant group. In a cruel twist, Renee seems to become responsible for the violence herself because she states that she could choose to reject the system altogether; she seems to be saying that the violence to which she subjects herself is slightly more tolerable than what she would suffer if she rejected words altogether.

The last sentence of Renee’s first paragraph is also important. “Everyone thinks differently and this is how I think, to myself, my own words, my own thoughts.” She allows for variation in how people think, and recognizes that people are individuals;

perhaps, for Renee, words are not monolithic, after all. There is confidence in this statement, an assertion of self and agency that Stuckey would not have predicted. Renee asserts that she has her own words—she owns them—and they are integral to her experience of self and thinking. In Vizenor’s terms, Renee is asserting her own presence. Brandt might say that Renee is revealing here an awareness of the potential for appropriation.

In Bakhtin’s terms, Renee is demonstrating some degree of internally persuasive discourse. In this discourse, utterances that began as part of authoritative discourse, or the language of hegemony, are transformed. Internally persuasive discourse is comprised of words that are partially one’s own. Though half-belonging to someone else, the word “becomes ‘one’s own’ only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention” (“Discourse” 293). In other words, when she thinks to herself, with her own words and her own thoughts, Renee is using internally persuasive discourse. This is significant to our discussion of survivance because it suggests that Renee has successfully used literacy for her own purposes. This is no mean feat. As Bakhtin explains, we must struggle with words before they can become our own.

. . . [M]any words stubbornly resist, others remain alien, sound foreign in the mouth of the one who appropriated them and who now speaks them; they cannot be assimilated into his context and fall out of it; it is as if they put themselves in quotation marks against the will of the speaker. Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker’s intentions; it is populated--overpopulated--with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it

to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process (“Discourse” 293-94).

Renee’s entire essay can be read as exactly this struggle. Words are “not a neutral medium,” but are instead fraught with “the intentions of others.” In her essay, Renee is wresting words from what she has assimilated and forcing them to work for her own intentions. The struggle is a sign of survivance, and as we can see, she has been engaged in that struggle for a lifetime.

In the second paragraph of the essay, Renee describes her early experiences with words. “Ever since I was a child, I only talked to people I knew really well and did not like talking to anyone else. I usually kept to myself unless asked a question or was just in one of those situations where I was not given a choice but to talk. One of those situations contained a speech class in 2nd grade when I was only 8 years old and people thought I did not know how to use many words because I was so quiet.” We can see the continuing thread of a sense of powerlessness when Renee says she was not given a choice. People thought her silence indicated ignorance. Yet she tells us that she was quiet because she did not want to talk, not because she couldn’t. There is an unresolved conflict in these sentences. In one sense, she made a choice to be quiet, while others perceived her as unable to choose (assuming her vocabulary was deficient). In another sense, though, she felt powerless when someone compelled her to speak.

Renee acknowledges the ways in which other people use words, and contrasts those ways with her own use. She says that “People use words to describe how they feel or what they’re meaning is to a story. I just use them because I’m bored.” The word “bored” implies that words do not matter. The title of the essay, “Overrated,” also implies

that words are not worth their supposed value, and are not worth her attention. This is a contradiction to other statements Renee makes about how she feels about words, and as such, her statements about boredom are evidence of the multivocality or heteroglossia of Renee's essay. There are multiple voices in dialog with each other within Renee's own utterances. Later in the essay, Renee again juxtaposes boredom with strong emotion: "I know my words and I know how to use them but I rarely like using them because I tend to think they sometimes waste my time. Words are not complicated but I hate the fact that I have to use them every single day." Words are boring and a waste of time. Yet, she "hates" needing to use them every day. Renee's claims of casual judgment are undermined, or at least complicated, by some of her other statements about the power of words.

Renee's next words, in fact, reveal actual fear. After stating she only uses words when bored, Renee writes, "Its letting words ruin and control my life that scares me." Now, words are dangerous, with the power to "ruin and control" her life. Renee does not explain this statement immediately. Instead, she moves to another "language" within her heteroglossia, and describes her lack of need for words. She writes, "I know communication can deal with using a lot of words but sometimes the communication I go through daily does not involve words at all." She says that she doesn't need language like other people seem to need it. "I guess I am just one of 'those' people who do not need you to explain because I already understand what I should know and understand already. I am not saying I know exactly what you would mean but sometimes I usually just get it most of the part." The tone here is casual, as if words are simply disposable, yet Renee preceded these claims with a statement of significant fear. The only other mention of fear

comes slightly earlier in the essay, when Renee explains that she is most comfortable when she is alone, because she knows she is “not being judged at any moment.” So, when Renee is alone, she is safe from other people’s uses of words. Renee is afraid of words because they have the power to “ruin and control” her life, and to emotionally wound her. In this paragraph of Renee’s essay, Stuckey’s concept of literacy as violence begins to seem less conceptual and more concrete.

In spite of these dangers, Renee uses words in part because other people need her to. “I am sure it is pretty much useless to me at this point in my life but I put it all into consideration for others.” Renee suggests that she is only using words in a particular way because other people are relying on her, and not because she gets any value from them. “Learning how to use words appropriately is meaningless to me.” The adverb “appropriately” is significant because it establishes one of Renee’s beliefs about writing, which is that there is a right and a wrong way to use language. Predictably, that belief is directly related to education. “Sometimes I do feel like I am wasting my time writing papers because it’s all just words to me but I have to do it no matter what or else I’d fail a class or get bad grades on certain things and my mom would be very disappointed in all of it but she’d understand for the most part.” Renee’s use of words is externally motivated, a matter of “consideration for others.” And even though her mother would understand if she rejected the use of words, she doesn’t want to disappoint her.

The argument that Bakhtin might have with Renee is that she seems to value only the language of and for other people. It is as if she grants meaning and place to the words of others, but claims no substance or object for her own words. In a sense, Renee is noticing the arbitrary nature of the sign. It is as if she is claiming that words have no

referent except the one we agree to give it. Renee wants to communicate about the referent directly, because she perceives that the signifier is meaningless on its own—and can easily misdirect meaning. Yet, the rest of her world functions within this language system, so Renee is resigned to using it, in spite of the certainty of misdirection. Renee understands, on some level, that language is simultaneously imprecise and powerful. However, I think that Bakhtin would want to reassure Renee that even her words about meaningless words register in a longstanding conversation between Natives and Euro-Americans. Though we cannot control language because it is complex and constantly changing, we can engage in meaningful dialog. In this essay, however, Renee seems to be frustrated by language's challenges, and would prefer to live without it.

Renee is clear in saying, however, that her general rejection of words is not a rejection of communication. She describes her ideal communication situation as that which exists in her family. With her family members, Renee sometimes uses words, although they are not her favorite means of communication. She writes, "My family is the ones who understand me the most. They say I am very open-minded and loud but that's only when I want to be. I guess when I do talk I do not care what I say but it's usually not too often I have these moments." The implication is that Renee feels safe from judgment when with her family, and therefore words are fine at home. In this scenario, she is choosing to use words. But even when she is in control of the words, they are not her favorite means of communication. Instead, Renee prefers something that she calls "agreements of emotion."

My mom and I have this understanding that we do not need words to show our meaning. We just know. It's like knowing without any explanation. I can tell

when she's mad and she can tell when I'm sad. These examples are what I call agreements of emotions. The people closest to me also have this connection with me. They know how I am feeling or what I am thinking without saying anything. It is just the comfort level I am with certain people who make me feel relaxed and free when I do not have to say anything at all.

She prefers this wordless communication in which there is recognition and understanding, but not discussion or elaboration. Words seem to detract from communication and meaning for Renee. She says that other people's words are meaningless to her. She writes, "I usually do not listen to other people talk unless it has meaning to me, which is rarely." It is as if she prefers to experience reality directly, without the interference of language.

Just as she is not rejecting communication per se, Renee is also clear that she is not rejecting thinking. It's just that she would prefer to think without words. "I always wondered what life would be like without the usage of words and their meanings. I would definitely make my life a lot easier than it is now. A wordless mind that could say anything without actually saying anything is how I would put it." She specifies further, "I am not saying I want my life to be thoughtless, I just want it to be speechless. Being speechless would be perfect for me." Being speechless is the opposite of heteroglossia. Bakhtin would say that a wordless life is impossible; "...[W]e must deal with the life and behavior of discourse in a contradictory and multi-linguaged world" ("Discourse" 275). Perhaps, in her desire for a wordless life, Renee is revealing that she does not yet know how to manage all of the contradictions and languages that she perceives in discourse. Her own contradictions are evident in her desire for the power of thought, and simultaneous rejection of words. Renee explains, "I would not mind life without words.

Life would be a lot easier because it'd allow me to be me but that is just me thinking selfishly." I find it interesting that Renee says life without words means she would be allowed to be herself. She cannot be who she is as long as words interrupt and disrupt her life. I wonder, then: Who would Renee be, or who does she think she would be, if words did not get in her way?

Renee abandons her fantasy of a Self without words because she thinks that other people need them. She doesn't even think it would be possible for others to live without words. She writes, "I honestly think the world would shut down if it did not have words. Words come from everywhere and probably date back all the way to where I cannot count anymore. They sometimes stress me out and they just make life a little more complicated than it should be." One of Renee's frustrations with words is that they are inadequate for expressing what she might want to say. There is a lack of correspondence between her experience and the words that are available to her. Words just can't do what she wants them to.

It is hard putting my thoughts and feelings into words because sometimes my thoughts don't make sense and my feelings are unexplainable. My ideas aren't always the greatest and my choices of words aren't always the brightest but like I said, it doesn't affect me the way it does in everyone else.

She seems to be saying that although she may not be the most skillful user of words, she doesn't think that is especially important. Still, Renee indicates that she feels like her lack of words might make her appear inadequate to other people at times. "I can be so boring compared to people who speak their mind but I am fine with it." So, she accepts her own lack of need when it comes to words, even if others don't.

One of the reasons Renee does not like words is because they are sometimes misunderstood. “Sometimes people just don’t get what I mean and that’s one of the reasons I dislike words.” Frequently, Renee writes as if she has no use for language. “Some people cannot live without their words but me, I don’t like to categorize what I need and what I want so I just go with it.” Renee appears dismissive of words, as if she could wave them off like a fly and simply walk away. However, Renee also reveals that she is deeply affected by words.

When she reveals the intensity of words’ effect on her, Renee’s sentences imply a physical, corporal experience of language. Renee writes, “It sickens me how we have to use words everyday in a certain matter. ...[I]f it were up to me, I would not use words at all.” Words make her feel ill, or they disgust her. It is as if she experiences the violence of language in her body. She says later in that same paragraph, “I feel like I am being trapped everywhere I go because of words.” Figuratively, her freedom of movement in the world is limited by words. She can’t go where she wants, or do what she wants, because of words. Words have the power to trap her, restrict her freedom. This is exactly what Indian Affairs Commissioner Thomas Morgan was aiming for when he wrote that Indians “can not escape [the white man’s civilization], and must either conform to it or be crushed by it.” Morgan explicitly named the English language as the means by which Natives would be constrained, and Renee does indeed feel confined by words.

But that is not the worst that words can do. Renee writes, “Words make me go insane sometimes.” The violence of words, by making her sick and making her feel trapped, drives her out of her mind. Words can make her lose her mind, and herself. But

the violence still doesn't end, because words replace what they drive away—her own words—with someone else's words.

When I think of words, I think of people getting brainwashed. The brainwashing I mentioned here is forcing someone with their beliefs of language. It is in the books how we are supposed to use them and how we are supposed to say them.

Teachers throughout elementary and high school make sure these rules stick with you from day one.

Brainwashing is one instrument of war, especially war waged by cultural means. In fact, Renee uses the language of war when she writes, "I guess you can say the dictionaries are definitely one of my enemies." Her use of the word "enemies" cannot appear casual to me in the context of US colonization and subsequent assimilation policies that specifically employed English. For the Lakota, forced education, and forced use of English, was specifically intended to change the way they thought and acted and lived their lives. Renee is reflecting the history of assimilation policies, and the cultural violence of English literacy for American Indians. I don't argue that this is what she intended to convey, but rather that forced assimilation of American Indians via English education continues to affect the students in our classrooms. I will return to this point later in the chapter. For now, I want to examine the ways in which Renee's essay is evidence of survivance.

If we only understand her words literally, Renee might appear to both subjugated and diminished by the violence of literacy. In that case, Stuckey's literacy theory seems to shed more light than Brandt's theory of appropriation. However, Renee's actions are, in every respect, "louder than words." Rather than falling passive victim to literacy's

violence, she uses the weapon of literacy against itself. She appropriates the sponsor's literacy and rejects sponsorship. Ironically, she tells me, her English teacher, exactly what she thinks about words. Words serve as the means of protest. She tells her readers how she uses language, in spite of its limitations and dangers, and she also tells us what she wants from writing.

To begin understanding, we can return to the informal writing of my own that I shared with the class, and see how Renee's essay engages my text in dialog. In comparison to Renee's renunciation, I wrote a hymn in praise of the written word. I said that writing is powerful, and it makes me feel alive, and it helps me think about things. I also said, "The power of writing that I know least about as a writer, anyway, is the power to affect other people." Renee knows how writing affects her, and she used her essay to tell me. In Brandt's terms, the sponsored became the sponsor; Renee taught me something I didn't know. Not only did she share her knowledge, but she challenged my glib comments about writing by articulating a far more complex, and therefore more accurate, picture of writing.

One way Renee accomplishes this is by communicating her ambivalence about the power of writing. On the one hand, she writes that words are meaningless and she could live perfectly well without them. "I am sure it is pretty much useless to me at this point in my life...." The implication is that words have no power for Renee, and she does not need them. On the other hand, words are tremendously powerful to Renee. They can trap her, brainwash her and make her go insane. Throughout her essay, Renee alternates between claims that words are unimportant and she doesn't need them, and that words are powerful weapons used against people. Her position is more complex and more accurate

than the one I recorded on that sunny, summer day when I was writing about writing. By asserting her contradictory and co-existing experiences of language, Renee validates Brandt's claim that literacy can be used to control, and can then be used by those same people to exert power according to their needs. I stand with Renee in acknowledging that words can be used for many purposes, including danger and destruction.

Renee also engaged in dialog by pointing out how writing makes her feel. In normal, everyday conversation, we respond to the topics proposed by our conversation partners. I said in my informal piece that writing makes me feel alive, alert and engaged. In her essay, Renee said that writing makes her feel sick. "It sickens me how we have to use words everyday in a certain matter," she wrote. Renee also feels afraid, because words can "ruin and control" her life. I'm not entirely sure she was speaking metaphorically, either. Between the fear and stress she describes, I don't doubt that Renee sometimes does feel nauseous about words.

Renee also commented on the relationship I described between thinking and writing for me. I said that writing helps me think, and writing something down on paper seems to make my thoughts and emotions concrete and more easily managed. But Renee said that she does not need words to think, or at least would prefer if she didn't. She writes, "A wordless mind that could say anything without actually saying anything is how I would put it." For Renee, thinking and words are better off separate. She doesn't need a relationship between thinking and writing like I do, she seems to say. However, she recognizes that thinking and language are not actually separate, and so she claims the right to think in her own way. "Everyone thinks differently and this is how I think, to myself, my own words, my own thoughts."

Finally, among these contrasts between Renee's essay and my informal writing, there is one interesting point of correspondence. Describing my lifelong preference for writing over speaking, I wrote, "I am still not much of a talker. Never have been." For me, this is a matter of temperament. I actually have wished, at times, for the life of a monk or a nun in which I could be silent. But like Renee, silence doesn't seem possible. First of all, I'd probably have to claim a religion, perhaps Catholicism or Buddhism. Since I haven't even kept up my Unitarian membership, that won't work. Second, I am quite sure my friends and family would object to constant reading as our only mode of interaction. Further, I am a teacher, and teaching generally involves a fair amount of speaking. Thus, a life without speech does not feel like a real choice for me, just as it does not for Renee.

One important distinction within this correspondence is that Renee's essay addresses words in all forms, spoken and written. I, on the other hand, cannot imagine life without the written word. In my world, when I was growing up, writing and reading were both praised and prized. Renee's experience of literacy was quite different. Even so, she and I do have something in common in our preference for quiet.

What does it mean that Renee and I share this fantasy of a life without speech? In a way, Renee created an alliance with me by using something that she and I have in common. Rhetorically, this is a strategic move. Writers create identification with their audiences by pointing out what they have in common, their shared ground. When one is addressing the opposition, as in an argument, a skillful rhetor will show the ways in which the two positions are similar, so that they seem less distant. Such a move is more likely to result in acceptance of another's position, if not agreement. While Renee was not engaged in formal argument with my text, I believe she was responding to it. From a

stance that was figuratively right next to me, Renee stood in opposition to English teaching and words.

In other words, Renee's rhetorical choice gave me a different experience as a reader. I was more able to "enter into" Renee's point of view and could understand it better because we share this fantasy of silence. Had she not used this similarity, yet written an essay about the duplicitous and manipulative nature of English education, I might have had a different response. In other words, Renee knows that if you are going to tell your professor that her work is both meaningless and frightening, you would be wise to make friends with her first.

Renee is a skillful participant in dialog, and I would argue that engaging in dialog is another enactment of survivance. Renee did not passively accept my glib statements about writing, but instead, she countered with her own thoughts. If Renee were only responding to my words, we might consider her a more passive participant in the dialog. But I believe the vehemence of her engagement and the force of her irony are answer enough to any question of passivity. As I indicated earlier, I do not assume that this was a conscious or intentional engagement with my text, but given the themes of the two pieces and their presence within a single assignment, I think it is fair to consider her essay a dialogic response, nonetheless. I shared my writing with the class, and asked students how I might revise it. Renee took the opportunity to educate me, her teacher, about another point of view. Vizenor writes that survivance "... is clearly observable in narrative resistance and personal attributes, such as the native humanistic tease, vital irony, spirit, cast of mind, and moral courage. The character of survivance creates a sense of native presence over absence, nihility, and victimry" ("Aesthetics" 1). Who would

doubt that Renee's resistance to words, using words, is anything other than a courageous application of irony?

Renee is postindian rather than victim. Although she is deeply and personally aware that literacy can be violent, Renee uses literacy for purposes of survivance. In fact, there is one circumstance—just one—in which Renee does like words. Using two sentences in her four and a half page essay, Renee tells us that she does like words under one condition: “The only time I like using words is when I get to use them my way and no one else's.” She wants to use words as she chooses, not like someone else wants her to. And her interest in words is, at least in part, motivated by the desire to defend herself. Renee explains, “I like using them to the extent when no one can fully understand me completely because I find it nervously scary when someone thinks they know you too well.” Renee likes words when she can use them, perhaps as a weapon, to protect herself from an invasive Other. She has told us she can use her words; she knows how. And she likes using words when she has the power to determine how they are used, and when she can use them for her own purposes.

It is interesting to me that Renee usually discusses words as being externally directed or motivated. As described earlier, Renee feels like she needs to use words for other people, such as her mother and the people she interacts with daily. In that case, she uses words because other people need her to, and not because she needs to use them. Conversely, but still externally motivated, it is because of other people that she doesn't want to use words, because she will be judged, endangered, misunderstood. She has little use for words, but the people around her do. This suggests to me that words for Renee are

part of authoritative discourse, and not yet fully integrated as internally persuasive discourse.

However, there is one case in which Renee indicates she uses words for purposes that begin internally, for her reasons and not as a response to someone else. She tells the reader that she wants other people to hear what she has to say. In her concluding paragraph, Renee summarizes her beliefs about words, and indicates how important this belief is in her life.

With all of this said, I hope this makes all the perfect sense than how I described my feelings deep down. Believing in something is a big part of my life and the words only make this a bigger part of my belief. It doesn't matter who will or will not agree with me but who will or will not want to listen to it. There are just too many words that mean the same and it doesn't make sense how all of them came about so now it is all overrated to me.

Several things are notable about these sentences. First, Renee indicates that she has described her "feelings deep down." In other words, she has shared something that is internal and otherwise unseen, something private. Yet, what is private is inseparable from the public, the rest of her life, because she has told us something about how this belief shapes her experience in the world. In the next sentence, when she suggests how important her belief is, she also introduces an ambiguous phrase. When she writes, "the words only make this a bigger part of my belief," do "the words" refer to language as she has been discussing it in the essay, or do they refer to the written, authorial words she has used to explain her belief about language? The latter explanation is plausible, because the general belief she has been describing is about words. If this sentence means "words used

to write this essay,” then the sentence suggests that Renee has used the words in the essay in her way “and no one else’s.” This is a literate act of survivance.

Renee’s statement about who will agree and who will listen is especially interesting to me. In this dialog, she is not looking for agreement or conversion to her point of view. She says, “It doesn’t matter who will or will not agree with me but who will or will not want to listen to it.” She is not arguing. Instead, she just wants to know who is listening to what she says. Who will listen to Renee? Who wants to know what she has to say? Her desire is particularly poignant when I think of Lyons’ question, “What do American Indians want from writing?” Renee is telling us exactly what she wants from writing. She is telling us, “The only time I like using words is when I get to use them my way and no one else’s.” She is also telling us, by how she uses words, that her way is one of survivance.

Although Renee is not arguing with the goal of agreement, Bakhtin would suggest that she is expecting some kind of response to her words. The writer who “puts in her oar,” to use Kenneth Burke’s phrase, provokes a response from her reader. Bakhtin explains what a speaker or writer expects to happen.

He does not expect passive understanding that, so to speak, only duplicates his own idea in someone else's mind. Rather, he expects response, agreement, sympathy, objection, execution, and so forth . . . The desire to make one's speech understood is only an abstract aspect of the speaker's concrete and total speech plan. Moreover, any speaker is himself a respondent to a greater or lesser degree. He is not, after all, the first speaker, the one who disturbs the eternal silence of the universe. . . . Any utterance is a link in a very

complexly organized chain of other utterances (*Speech Genres* 69).

Renee's essay is part of an ongoing dialog between American Indians and English teachers. Her desire for people to listen creates an opportunity for English teachers to respond to her, as well as to the historical and cultural voices that inflect her dialog with us. If non-Indian teachers are listening to Renee when she tells us what she wants, then what? How shall we respond? What is our role, if we have one at all, in helping Renee to write in her own way?

Furthermore, what does writing look like when Renee uses words her way, and no one else's? It is impossible to determine how much of Renee's writing in this class is written in her words, her way. Yet we do have some indication of this. In the interview she did with me at the end of the semester, Renee's comments suggest that some of her writing, at least, felt like it was truly hers. As the interview transcript reveals, Renee says that some of what she wrote for the class was meaningful to her, independent of its uses or relevance to anyone else. The excerpt includes comments that Renee made about her "This I Believe" essay. Our conversation just before this excerpt begins was about how future writing will be easier when Renee understands her subject thoroughly.²⁶

G: That makes sense. [pause 2s] Um, is there anything that you didn't learn about writing this semester that you wanted to? Anything that you wish that you had learned about writing?

Renee: Mm. Let me think back. [pause 7s] Maybe—um no, not really. No, it was just the back in, I think it was the "This I Believe" paper.

²⁶ In the transcripts of interviews with Renee, I use her name and "G" for Gardner to clearly distinguish the speaker.

I was surprised that Renee brought up the “This I Believe” assignment. This is the only specific assignment she mentions in the interview, and we were nearing the end. More important, she mentions the assignment in response to my question about what she didn’t learn but wanted to. The length of her pause is significant—seven seconds. That is the longest pause in the interview, and it suggests that the topic still has some weight or importance to her.

G: Uh huh.

Renee: And I was just looking out over all their subjects or whatever, their topics, and I was just, like, how did they get their ideas. That’s what I was wondering. Like where did their ideas come from. Like where did ... like, I don’t know. It was just weird.

As I noted earlier in the chapter, as a class we looked at several examples of “This I Believe” essays that were published on the website. In addition, I asked students to read or listen to three additional essays, and then print one they liked and bring it to class. Renee is talking here about having trouble with invention, “getting ideas.” Her mention of this trouble leads me to wonder whether frustration with invention contributed to her decision to write about words.

G: Um hum. [pause 1s] Well, tell me more about that.

Renee: I don’t know, I can’t remember. [pause 2s] I can’t really remember it.

[laughs]

G: I remember your “This I Believe” paper. Do you remember what you wrote about?

Renee: I think so, yeah. Yeah I did.

G: Uh huh.

Renee: Um, about the...using words [laughs] Yeah.

G: Um hum. [pause 3s] Yeah I was really, I was very interested in that, and curious about what you would say today, you know, at the end of this experience. Um, I'm wondering if you still feel like you did in the "This I Believe" paper, or if that has changed at all?

Renee: Mmm. [pause 1s] Somewhat changed. I kind of still feel the same, it's just you know, like I gotta do what I gotta do. That's how I feel about it.

G: Um hum. So you still kind of feel the same, but you have a sense of...what. What does it mean when you say you "gotta do" what you've got to do?

Renee: [laughs] Uh, like, it's not a bad thing to write, you know. I just, yeah.

[Interrupted by noise in the other office again.]

G: Um, [pause 2s], does writing seem like less of a bad thing, or about the same? I'm not quite sure, so that's why I'm [pause 1s] kind of following up.

Renee: Maybe less of a bad thing. 'Cause I, liked being in this class, I looked at writing as like just writing, you know. And it didn't really [pause 2s] I don't know, care for writing as much, but like writing helped me a lot through this semester.

So [pause 2s].

G: So it's been useful?

Renee: Yeah.

My offer of the word "useful" was meant to reflect what Renee was saying without changing it, as an interview strategy of active listening. An active listener will paraphrase the speaker's statement so the speaker knows that the interviewer heard and understood. I

was trying to encourage Renee to explain more of what she meant by saying “writing helped me a lot.”

G: [pause 1s] I wonder then if, um, part of, I wonder if what you’re saying is that maybe you don’t feel any differently about it, but that you see that it’s useful?

Renee: Yeah.

G: I don’t know [raised eyebrows and shrugged].

Renee: Well, [laughs] I don’t know, it’s just weird; it’s hard to explain.

G: Yeah.

Renee: It’s like, yeah, I sort of feel the same way about it, but then again, it’s like, I...I look...I like used it, you know, in a useful way, so.

G: Um hum. Had it not been useful before?

Renee: Kind of. I guess you can say.

In this next sentence, I was trying to figuratively make room for Renee to back off from the word “useful,” because I wanted to be sure she was saying what she meant, instead of just repeating my paraphrase of what she said.

G: Hmm. Um hum. [pause 3s] ‘Cause it’s entirely understandable if you were to say, “No, I really don’t think it’s changed.” You know because we’ve only had one semester of this class, you know, and it was only one semester, compared to twelve years of schooling before this. And you’ve described some pretty um [pause 1s] powerful—

Renee: [interrupting] Maybe it’s cause, yeah, it’s cause this whole class was just mainly about yourself. And through high school it’s all about different kinds of

subjects. And maybe I had a couple papers about me but it hasn't like, it hasn't really, I don't know. Made an impact on me like this class has.

I was surprised when Renee interrupted my sentence with her explanation. Her need to speak in that moment suggests to me that her words were important to her.

G: So, what kind of impact has this class had?

Renee: Um, a good one [laughs] Um, yeah. I'll just...I remember, um, I remember some of like the important things of this class, so [pause 1s] it will be useful, very useful, in the future.

G: Hmm. Well I'm glad that that's true. And you know, I don't expect to hear that, 'cause like I said, it's a short semester, and people have different responses to it. And I'm kind of curious why some people really have a positive experience, and for others it's just something to get through. So that's part of what I want to understand in this process of doing interviews.

Renee: I think that's kind of how I felt in the beginning, just something to get through.

G: Yeah.

Renee: But it's changed. [pause 2s] So.

G: And the thing that I've heard you say a few times is that, I think what you've said is that the valuable part was that you got to write about you. [pause 1s] Is that a fair characterization, or do you think that that's why it was a good experience?

Renee: It was a good experience because, like, I learned a lot about myself. That's why.

This is perhaps Renee's clearest sentence in the whole interview. While she often speaks in phrases, with omissions of words and changes in grammatical referents (such as when "it" becomes "I"), Renee was decisive in this response. She was also quick, and sounded certain. In the moment, I felt surprised by her how sure and clear she sounded on this point. No, the class was not valuable because she got to write about herself: it was valuable because she learned a lot about herself. Her emphasis was on the learning, not on the writing.

G: Ok.

Renee: And it just helped me get to know myself better as a writer.

G: So what did you learn about yourself as a writer?

Renee: I need to take my time in writing—

G: Ah.

Renee: —I should, yeah, don't rush it.

G: Ok.

Renee: Don't rush it. And, obviously, be more confident in writing.

G: And most of us become more confident when we do something more.

Renee: Yeah.

So, she did learn about herself as a writer, but that was secondary to learning about herself more generally. Something changed for Renee during the course of the semester, and she says that what changed was her knowledge about herself. "It was a good experience because, like, I learned a lot about myself. That's why." This isn't the response I was expecting from Renee, or anyone else. I expected comments more closely related to writing.

Near the end of the interview, I asked Renee how she would advise next fall's first year students.

G: So, if you met somebody next August who was going to take this class, what would your advice be to that student?

Renee: Mm, always be in class so you don't miss an assignment. And [pause 3s] hmm [pause 4s] don't take any of the assignments for granted.

G: Oh, tell me what you mean by that.

Renee: Well, some people didn't really care about the writing, so, they were just being lazy. I would say don't be lazy about the writing.

G: Oh, ok. Ok.

Renee: Just write what you really mean. [laughs]

G: Did you feel like you were able to do that?

Renee: Yeah. Most of the, probably.

At least in this conversation, Renee indicates that she was able to write what she meant most of the time.

What Renee most liked about the course was what she learned about herself. We can speculate that perhaps she learned, in writing her "This I Believe" essay, that she could resist the demands of literacy, and appropriate words in order to express her resistance. Perhaps she learned how a weapon can also be used as a tool. At the same time, Renee also fulfilled requirements for a college course, the credits for which apply toward graduation, and thus Renee took one step toward her long term goals. Though we can see evidence of literacy's violence in Renee, we can also see that she is resilient and courageous. Vizenor says, "The postindian warriors encounter their enemies with the

same courage in literature as their ancestors once evinced on horses, and they create their stories with a new sense of survivance. The warriors bear the simulations of their time and counter the manifest manners of domination” (*Manifest* 4). I don’t imagine that I am Renee’s enemy, but I do imagine it took courage to write an essay for an English class in which she claims words are both violent and meaningless. And ultimately, she is using the words she despises to fight back. In her “Age 70” paper, we can see what Renee is fighting for.

A favorite of many students in the class, the “Age 70” paper requires students to be both reflective and imaginative. Writing objectives include variation of sentence structure (using sentence combining) and development of statements with details. The assignment is for students to imagine themselves at age 70, looking back on their lives. I ask them to write what they see, including at least three stages of their lives. One of the stages should be something that has already occurred, i.e. before the students enrolled in the class. Two must be imagined.

For her future, Renee imagines success as a result of sacrifice and hard work. On her way to college graduation and a career, she imagines that there will be challenges, but she expects to meet them. She anticipates her college graduation, writing, “The day I’ve been waiting for is here and I could not be happier from anything in my entire life. My college graduation is finally here up and I am nervous and excited at the same time.” While most students include college graduation in their papers about the future, and most write about pride and excitement related to graduation, Renee is a little unusual in the importance she ascribes to the event. She “couldn’t be happier” from anything else, and graduating is “one of the most fulfilling” experiences she expects to have.

The importance of graduation is particularly interesting in light of how hard Renee expects to work for it. She writes, “College was interesting and I did overcome obstacles I thought I was not ready for. It was definitely not what I was expecting. Well sure, I expected some hard challenges here and there, but I didn’t expect them every day.” The difficult choices she describes are primarily social.

I thought college was going to turn me into a big party animal that everyone wanted me to be. I thought that I was going to procrastinate even more now that my mom was not here to be strict with me, but I learned that the choices won’t necessarily reflect on you in the moment, but they will in the aftermath of it all. I hope I made all the right choices in not partying every night or weekend like most of my friends and choices of hanging out with people that, not just helped, but made me do my homework.

Renee feels the social pressure of what other people want from her, but she selects the pressures she will respond to. She surrounds herself with people who will pressure her toward her own goals for herself, toward what she thinks will make her happy and fulfilled. In this sense, Renee and her friends are accumulating literacy from both their school experiences and from each other. Brandt explains that as we accumulate literacy across categories of race, gender, age and class, we experience “an increasingly intricate set of incentives, sources, and barriers for learning to read and write, the negotiation of which becomes a large part of the effort of becoming (and staying) literate” (“Accumulating” 665). Renee expects to successfully negotiate both her resources and her challenges.

Finally, while some students write about the things they imagine will happen to them, Renee envisions herself as an active creator of her future.

My life does not stop here when I am done with college. I plan on joining a major computer software corporation possibly in New York City. The cities are definitely where I need to go to be more successful in this business. From high school to college, people say they leave a chapter in their lives to find themselves but I am leaving this chapter in my life to create myself. Hope all turns out as good as it gets.

Renee says that while other people expect to passively find themselves, she is going to actively create herself. Just as she signaled in her “This I Believe” essay, Renee is directing her own life. She is actively making choices that she thinks are best, not just responding to pressures from other people. I don’t argue that Renee is unaffected by social institutions or the colonial context in which she gained her literacy; instead, I argue that Renee is up to the challenge.

Like the two women in Brandt’s study who appropriated literacy from the workplace to improve material conditions for their families, Renee demonstrates that she is capable of her own “subversive diversion of literate power” (“Sponsors” 183). She uses writing to “talk back” to her English teacher and assert her reality as valid. And in so doing, Renee enacts the potential for exchange between the sponsor and the sponsored. Brandt says that literacy appropriation “open[s] up in the clash between long-standing, residual forms of sponsorship and the new: between the lingering presence of literacy’s conservative history and its pressure for change.” By using words to resist, Renee enables her sponsor, i.e. me and other English teachers, to adjust to changing conditions and

transform our own uses of language. If we listen, we can learn, too. Stuckey does get it right when she argues that literacy is violent, but Renee demonstrates that literacy is not *only* violent. Renee has imagined and enacted survivance, using, at least in some measure, her words, her way.

Conclusion

What does Renee want from writing? She wants to use words in her way, “and no one else’s.” Some readers may object, saying that Renee doesn’t know what is good for her, that she doesn’t yet know what she needs to graduate from college and become employed in the software industry in a major city. In the context of colonization and assimilation, I hope we wouldn’t be so quick to assume we know exactly what Renee needs. I would hope that we would listen to what she says she wants, and why. Of course, it is also incumbent upon us as educators to analyze what Renee says within the larger context of what we know about writing, language and power. I am not arguing that we should only listen to what Renee wants and just give her that in a writing course. Instead, I think that what Renee and other students want should be part of what we consider when we plan our writing courses. As I discussed at length in chapter two, asking students what they want from writing is essential for teaching literacy for freedom, but it is not sufficient. The students’ needs, goals, and desires must be included with our educational goals for cultural critique and facility with the dominant discourse. Ultimately, the synergy of students’ and teachers’ goals may hold our best hopes of education for freedom, and our goals may be more compatible than we think. According to Renee, we don’t even have to agree; we just have to listen.

Renee values writing for what she can learn about herself. Poet Diane Glancy says the same thing, and she asks what else may be possible. "...[W]riting is how I came to understand the layers of self and its placement between the margins of the worlds. Writing is an act of survivance. It scrapes the edges of a mixed-blood, broken heritage, leaving some of it silent and wrapped in mystery. ... What are the roots of native writing? What are its possibilities?" (271). What is possible for Renee will change as she "scrapes the edges" of both her heritage and her future, using words. Words are the weapon she uses as a tool. With this tool she can uncover, repair and create something new, over and over in her lifetime. To the call issued by Lyons, Powell, Anderson and others, I offer this response: This is how Renee used writing.

CHAPTER FIVE

TEACHING AND LEARNING RHETORICAL AGENCY

Gerald Vizenor would appreciate the irony, I think. I am proposing that we use personal writing to teach students to engage in public advocacy. Personal writing in this study means writing, in any form, for which the self is the source. As I explained in chapter two, personal writing has a troubled history in composition, and none of the American Indians in composition and rhetoric are suggesting we use it in the classroom. However, I have shown in this project that there are points of connection between writing with the self as source and writing that is rhetorical, which is meant to engage an audience for a particular purpose. Writing with the self as source is one way of tapping into agency, which can then be directed toward relational writing for an audience, which can become writing to engage in social conversations. In this chapter, I describe a course in which students such as Kyle, Ben, Jeff and Renee would use their interests to generate a beginning point for learning new rhetorical strategies and using writing in ways that have potential for change beyond individual experience. I argue that students can write texts capable of contributing to rhetorical sovereignty by identifying their positions in cultural conversations, and by using rhetorical models for engaging in written dialog.

When I refer to rhetorical sovereignty, I follow Lyons' use of the term. As discussed throughout this project, Lyons is asking those of us in composition and rhetoric to notice and respond to what American Indians, as a group, want to do with language. Given the colonial context, including how language has been used in opposition to Indian

interests, and given the challenge of using the dominant discourse for sovereignty, Lyons argues that we need to ask the people what they want language to do for them. When Indian peoples control their objectives and their rhetoric, then some measure of justice is possible. In contrast, Lyons' question is not an argument that we should survey individual Natives and, upon hearing what they say, give those Indians whatever they want.

Like Lyons, I do not argue in this project that we should survey individual Indians, and then give them whatever they want in our writing classes.²⁷ Though it might be well meaning, such a response to Lyons' challenge would do little if anything to strengthen either those individuals or their nations. However, I do argue that when we notice the ways in which students already want to use language, we can teach them to recognize themselves as powerful with language, while we also teach them how to expand their repertoire of ways to be powerful.

Even though Lyons is not asking what individual Natives want, I maintain that he would acknowledge the value and power of the individual rhetor. I base this interpretation, in part, on his use of the singular when he refers to the "Indian voice" in his definition of rhetorical sovereignty. He writes, "As the inherent right and ability of people to determine their own communicative needs and desires in the pursuit of self-determination, rhetorical sovereignty requires above all the presence of an Indian voice, speaking or writing in an ongoing context of colonization and setting at least some of the terms of the debate" ("Rhetorical" 462). Cultural sovereignty is clearly a concept for the

²⁷ I remind the reader that in this case study, I did not ask the students, "What do you want from writing?" Instead, all student writing and interview comments were gathered within the context of a larger project related to the Expressive Writing class. Only later did I use the frame of Lyons' question to try to understand students' experiences with writing.

peoples, the group, while rhetorical sovereignty may be practiced by an individual. (Rhetorical sovereignty may even be practiced by a trickster, speaking with the pronoun “I.”) This distinction will be important in this chapter because, as I will explain, I argue that an individual student’s experiences, thoughts, and emotions can be useful as an entry into and resource within cultural conversations about the representation of Indian peoples and other matters of self-determination for the group.

Notably, while Lyons asks his question about what Indian peoples want, he answers with his individual response, the “I” that is educated and influential. After explaining how rhetoric was used successfully in the Washington Redskins trademark case, Lyons says, “That’s what I want from writing” (466). Even though he would not recommend we teach according to individual requests, Lyons implies that it is acceptable for individual Indians to register their interests in certain kinds of writing, within this public conversation in composition and rhetoric. True, he is a scholar within the community. However, I think students’ words about writing are also relevant in this public discussion. In my project, four young Natives in the Midwest who are first year college students tell us about some of the things they want, related to writing. Renee, Kyle, Ben and Jeff are most interested in writing that is personal, relational, and reflective.²⁸ These are not their only interests, but they are the themes that were most prominent during this study. Further, these are the types of writing in which the students are most likely to recognize their own agency. I think we can use this information to design a course that would be more successful than either of the writing courses the

²⁸ As I explained in chapter two, the personal theme includes many types of writing, all of which use the self as a source. Relational writing enables the students to interact with someone else, and reflective writing is a way for students to gain perspective on their experiences or learning.

students enrolled in during their first year of college.

Lyons specifies public discourse as the arena for which he advocates rhetorical sovereignty (see Wells). This is discourse about matters of interest to Indian nations, including political and legal matters. Lyons urges us to teach toward rhetorical strategies such as those that resulted in denial of the Washington Redskins trademark, and those practiced at the Tribal Law and Government Center within the University of Kansas Law School. There is no question that both the maintenance and extension of Indian rights require the skillful use of rhetoric, and that Indian nations are best served by rhetors who share their interests.

The kind of class that I am arguing for in this chapter would not specifically prepare students to engage in legal or other specialized discourse. However, it would prepare students to think of themselves as skillful rhetors who can participate effectively in public conversations, and who can further expand their repertoire of “available means” (as Aristotle recommends) by studying others’ successful strategies. While I am not working specifically with Habermas’ concept of the public sphere, as Lyons’ did, I am using the word “rhetoric” to refer to writing intended for a particular audience to achieve some goal.

In this chapter, I describe the pedagogy that I would like to offer to Ben, Kyle, Jeff and Renee. To begin, I modify Lyons’ recommendation that we teach students American Indian and other resistance rhetoric with the idea that we teach these texts in pairs, as conversations.²⁹ In addition, I recommend that we assign writing in which

²⁹ While teaching texts in pairs, as dialog, has not yet been recommended for studying American Indian rhetorical texts in composition, the learning strategy is certainly not new. For example, lawyers have a long tradition of studying arguments as texts in dialog. In

students use the rhetorical strategies they learn from these texts, and which students then make public in some way. Before students do this writing, however, I recommend that they identify their location within a cultural conversation by writing texts that are personal, relational, and reflective. I will explain each of these strategies and provide examples.

Locating themselves in cultural conversations

When I say students should locate themselves in reference to a conversation, I mean that they should identify some of the thoughts, emotions and experiences that they have related to this conversation. In short, what is at stake for them? As we saw in chapter two, Kyle, Jeff, Ben and Renee are all interested in writing which somehow involves them. For example, both Kyle and Ben want to write about their emotions, though for different purposes; Kyle wants to express his feelings and use the writing later as a point of reference for how far he has come, while Ben wants to communicate his feelings to another person. I want students to use writing like this to connect with larger issues in meaningful ways.

I will explain how this might work with one pair of texts, including “A Proclamation to the Great White Father and All His People” from 1969 and the “Treaty of Fort Laramie” in 1868. Before students even read the texts, I would have them do some writing in order to locate themselves in terms of some of the related issues. Those issues might include land, federal government, promises, and fair trade, among many possibilities. If I were using fair trade, I would ask students to do some writing about the

addition, Malea Powell and others have addressed the importance of understanding American Indian rhetoric in context, including related contemporary rhetoric. What I add is the use of related texts together, in dialog, in a college writing class.

term and concept. Initial writing could be done informally in class. Where have they seen the term “fair trade,” and what did it mean in that context? What are some other meanings, and what are the contexts for those? Do they notice any emotional reaction to the term? Is it important to them to buy products labeled “fair trade,” such as coffee? After students generate some initial writing, I would ask them to write a definition of fair trade. What are the conditions under which trading is fair? How would you measure whether trading was fair? Who should make the determination of whether a trade was conducted fairly? What should happen when trade is not fair? Thus, instead of moving directly into either historical background or rhetorical analysis, I would begin with the students’ responses to some of the significant issues.

Some might argue that it is more important at the beginning to push students outside their comfort zones, and into material that is unfamiliar and challenging, rather than beginning with writing that is easily accessible. I would argue that it is important to help students make connections between material they are learning and their own lives before pushing them too far outside of known territory. Not only do I want to see students thinking through writing, as Kyle describes in chapter two, but I want to see them using their writing to think about their lives, their cultures, and their roles in shaping both those things. Eventually, in this class, I want students to write something they will send into the world, something that will be read, something that might influence some small change.

Certainly, I agree with Lisa Delpit and others who say that we need to teach students the standards necessary for success; I am not saying students should only do writing that is personal or that comes easily. No class should be limited to the writing that students can do without additional learning. Instead, I would say the question is in how to

get students to the point of struggling productively with something unfamiliar and difficult. Ben, Renee, Kyle and Jeff indicate that they would like to, figuratively, make sure they get to bring themselves along for the ride. They want to write, and they are interested in many things, but these students want their ideas and experiences to be recognized as meaningful and relevant.

There is another reason for students to identify their locations in a cultural conversation. When students see that they have a stake in a particular issue, I think they are more likely to recognize their potential for influence. My reasoning is based on what we have learned about agency for Kyle, Ben, Jeff and Renee. These students are most likely to feel like they can create change with certain types of writing. Now, the students have more agency than they recognize, as we saw with Kyle and Jeff in chapter three. But as the students see it, the writing they can use is personal, relational, and reflective. They can use those kinds of writing to make something happen. Most of the time, the changes students report making are within themselves, but they also use writing to modify relationships in some ways. Because the students already know that they can use writing to create changes that are important to them, I think we can show them how to use those same kinds of writing to create other kinds of change, too. In the class I am proposing, and in keeping with Lyons' call for writing that engages in public conversations about cultural sovereignty, I want students to take action with their writing. I want Kyle, Jeff, Ben and Renee to use writing in ways that are meaningful to them and to their communities, however they define those communities.

Recognizing agency

Rhetoricians are agents who make things happen, using language. Postindian

rhetoricians in particular are bent on action, on writing new stories with an old language they intend to shape along the way. Vizenor's postindian can recognize agency in a number of places. Although some theorists are concerned that a postmodern conception of identity minimizes agency, I think agency increases with fragmentation, as I explained in chapter two. In addition, I think students recognize their own agency most clearly in writing that is personal, relational, and reflective. For these reasons, I recommend a writing assignment in which students develop an understanding of themselves as subjects with multiple layers that are always in motion. In this assignment, students will also recognize that they are making related decisions about language, every day, all day, and that those decisions either create or close opportunities for them in their relationships with other people. Finally, students will also see that, in making those decisions, they are demonstrating agency through language.

I would begin by asking students to write a description of their identities, from the imagined perspective of three different people in their lives.³⁰ We all present ourselves differently to others, depending, for example, on our reasons for interacting with those people in a particular time and place. When students describe themselves from the imagined perspective of other people, they will begin to pay attention to the complexity they experience daily but don't necessarily notice. They will see that some aspects of their identities are more prominent in some situations than others. If students' think of themselves as having a unified self, that idea will be interrupted and challenged in this step.

³⁰ I would encourage students to use a "mind map" with shapes, colors, and variations in line.

Next, I will ask students to talk in small groups about the complexity of their identity as it appears on paper, at this point. They will probably be able to identify some of the ways in which they have created, encouraged, and maintained these identities for the three people. When I ask the students which of the three identities is “real,” they will be able to recognize that all of them feel “true” to some degree, some of the time. As a result, students will recognize that it is more accurate to think of themselves as having multiple subjectivities, rather than one unified identity. The students will probably also be able to identify some of the differences in their language use with the three people, and talk about how those uses contribute to others’ perceptions of them, to their own constructions of identity, and to the relationships themselves.

Returning to the large group, we will continue the conversation about language, noticing the relative power assigned to different uses of language by different groups. Students will be able to identify the different ways in which they try to gain power with language, such as by speaking with “standard” English at work, for example. Importantly, students will recognize that they are shifting language strategies when they shift from one subjectivity to another.

In the last step of this assignment, I will ask students to add several additional layers of complexity. First, I will ask students to add, perhaps with a different color or texture of paper, any characteristics of their identities that are important to them but not represented on the paper. Then I will ask them to visually mark in some way any identity descriptors that are increasing or strengthening, as well any descriptors that are receding in importance to them. By this time, students will notice that their subjectivities are complex and changing. Students will also recognize that they constantly make choices

about which subjectivities they will forefront in certain situations, and that they use a variety of language strategies, depending on the interaction of subjectivities and situations.

As a result of this assignment, students will develop a more nuanced sense of the power that is available to them through language. Like Bakhtin's "spectral dispersion" of the word, the students will begin to understand that language as a means of agency for them is less a matter of straightforward skills and more a matter of prismatic refraction of the relationships and scenarios in which they use language. In other words, students will come to recognize themselves as powerful with words.

Increasing agency in the classroom

In addition to teaching students to notice the power available to them through multiple subjectivities, there is another way we can promote students' sense of agency. In our classrooms, we can metaphorically make space for students to exert agency by making some choices. In other words, I want to increase students' agency in this writing class. This goal is consistent with the independence in Lyons' definition of rhetorical sovereignty for Indian peoples, which requires that they "determine their own communicative needs and desires in this pursuit, to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse" (449-450). While this is a concept for the people, individual rhetors are making many of these rhetorical choices. I do not imply that the community is absent from such choices; many people may influence the choices a rhetor makes in any communication, and that may be particularly true for an Indian rhetor with traditional cultural values. However, I return to Lyons' call for a "Native voice" to participate in the public debate. That "voice" needs experience making

decisions. We can provide a measure of independent decision-making to Native students in the classroom, and we should provide it, for two reasons.

First, encouraging as much choice-making as possible is a reversal of how English has been used as a tool in colonization. Reversal, of course, is neither denial nor erasure of what has gone on before. Instead, an abrupt shift is useful in part because of the inherent message that this language experience will be different from some of those, at least, that American Indians have had before. In the class I describe in this chapter, instead of demanding a particular use of language for certain purposes, Native students would make significant decisions about what they want to write, to whom, and for what purpose.

Second, a measure of independent decision-making for American Indians in writing classes is directly related to survivance. Vizenor has shown us clearly that survivance is a matter of agency, of active presence, both in spite of some and because of other conditions in one's life. Survivance is not a given; instead, survivance is chosen and actively created. Students who write because of their "communicative needs and desires" and who choose their "goals, modes, styles and languages of public discourse" are enacting survivance.

As Bakhtin would point out, students' use of language could never be free of the dominant or authoritative discourse. Instead, a rhetor speaks with language that has been shaped by other people through use, over time, and in using words, this rhetor too changes language. In this class, students also could not be free of the restrictions of a college course. In practical terms, students would still be required to write, revise, participate in peer review workshops, and fulfill course requirements. Teachers would

still need to provide feedback and evaluate the writing. But Lyons understood, of course, that rhetorical sovereignty for American Indians is always bound in some way by the rhetorical situation, including the contemporary era, geographic location, and history, for example. The crux in rhetorical sovereignty is not absolute freedom, which exists nowhere, but in agency, in the ability to choose one's response. No one is free from the dominant discourse, but we do have choices within it.

The teacher could make this point in the class, to help students understand that the rhetors they will read during the semester are also writing within constraints. For example, in the early years of colonization, Elias Boudinot, Cherokee and editor of the *Cherokee Phoenix*, advocated for Cherokee removal. As Rose Gubele explains, there are numerous interpretations of this advocacy, but they include the possibility that Boudinot was encouraging his nation to accept relocation in exchange for continued existence. Boudinot's simultaneous interest in the lives of Cherokee people and his affiliation with "progressives," people with wealth and western education, created conflicts that he negotiated publicly in his editorials. Boudinot's constraints require the strategic use of rhetoric, and students can recognize and evaluate his choices. Though they might choose differently, the students will increase their ability to identify and implement possibilities open to them, and to work within the constraints of their situation.

Rhetoric for Reading

The course would feature readings of pairs of texts, and writing in which students would model strategies in those texts. In this course, students would read rhetorical texts that are "in conversation" with each other in some way. By rhetorical texts, I mean those that are written for a specific audience to accomplish a specific purpose. When I say they

are “in conversation,” I am indicating that two (or more) texts are related based on a common topic or goal related to self-determination for Indian peoples. The two texts may take similar positions, but I think texts with opposing positions will be most useful. Students would read those texts as a conversation, and analyze the rhetorical strategies used by those texts.

This is different from Lyons’ recommendation that students read American Indian texts by themselves. While reading these texts on their own would be important work, I think students would learn even more by studying texts in dialog with each other. When you study a text on its own, you can discover its rhetorical moves. But when you study the text as part of a conversation, you learn more about the strategic ways of responding to others’ use of rhetoric. Lyons points to the work of University of Kansas Tribal Law and Government Center for the kind of rhetoric he would like students to become able to produce. Legal scholars and lawyers examine the way in which a case was argued, including the strategies used by two opposing sides in dialog with each other. I’m not sure that Lyons was suggesting students in composition work with legal texts, but he does want them eventually, at least, to be skillful at that level, in order to advocate for Indian peoples. I share that goal, but in the class I am describing, I want students to use different kinds of texts. Even Indian students with a clear stake in the legal arguments analyzed and reargued by Tribal Law and Government Center would likely have difficulty with the legal discourse. In fact, I imagine students reading court cases would feel like there is no way for them to enter that conversation, nothing they can actually do. Instead, I want students to recognize connections between what they read and, eventually, what action they might take. I would include texts from the American Indian Movement, historical

documents, first person narratives, and speeches, among other types of texts.

One of the advantages of reading texts in pairs, as dialog, would be that one would provide some of the historical context for the other. For example, reading the “Treaty of Fort Laramie,” from 1868, would establish some of the essential background for “A Proclamation to the Great White Father and All His People,” from 1969. I realize, of course, that Ben, Jeff, Kyle and Renee will be well aware of the treaties, but I would not assume they had ever read any. In addition, while the students certainly would know about the American Indian Movement, they may not have read any of the rhetorical texts drafted by their parents, grandparents, or other relatives during the Red Power Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. In order to fully appreciate the rhetorical moves of the Indian rhetors at Alcatraz, the students would need to read one of many treaties satirized in “A Proclamation.” One of the things students might notice in the treaty is the promise of a physician for the tribe (Article XIII), which is one of the early versions of promises for Indian health care. This would be an interesting point of reference for Ben, who already criticizes federal Indian health care in an essay for the Expressive Writing class. The personal, relational and reflective writing he already has done on that topic would help him to read that part of the treaty differently, helping him to make specific, meaningful connections between the historical document and something in his life that he wants to change.

Finally, reading pairs of texts would provide students with an opportunity to analyze audience and discuss strategies for persuading a particular audience. In other words, students would identify rhetorical strategies chosen by a particular rhetor in order to identify effective ways of engaging in dialog with that rhetor. Rhetorical strategies in a

text can be like clues in a communication puzzle, in which the students are trying to figure out how anyone could respond in ways the author would “hear” and respond to in the desired way. Useful questions for audience analysis based on the rhetor’s choices would include: What does this rhetor value? What counts as persuasive evidence? What sort of form is appropriate for this rhetor’s purpose? When students understand the choices made in regard to a text, they can understand something about the goals and values of the rhetor. When students have done this analysis, then they can observe the strategies of the “responding” text in the dialog, and evaluate the effectiveness of those choices.

For example, in the “Treaty of Fort Laramie,” rhetorical analysis would reveal that the position conveyed is one of fairness and reason. Students would see this in Article 1, where even the paragraph structure suggests equality between the two parties. After a declaration in the first sentence that all war would cease, the second sentence reads, “The government of the United States desires peace, and its honor is hereby pledged to keep it.” That sentence is followed by a parallel sentence, with Indians in the active role; “The Indians desire peace, and they now pledge their honor to maintain it.” Similarly, the first sentence of the next paragraph begins, “If bad men among the whites” commit crimes, they will be punished. In the following paragraph, the first sentence reads, “If bad men among the Indians” commit crimes, they too will be punished—though, tellingly, that paragraph is longer because there are more details about the consequences of Indians’ “crimes.” The appearance of equal agency, as subjects of sentences, and equal responsibility, as similarly punished, suggest the rhetor is just and reasonable, or at least values the appearance of being so.

“A Proclamation to the Great White Father and All His People,” which was written 101 years later, uses that same appearance of reason and fairness to protest U. S. actions and inaction. The proclamation even uses the words “fair and honorable” to point to the association they are making.

We wish to be fair and honorable in our dealings with the Caucasian inhabitants of this land, and hereby offer the following treaty: We will purchase said Alcatraz Island for twenty-four dollars (24) in glass beads and red cloth, a precedent set by the white man's purchase of a similar island about 300 years ago. We know that \$24 in trade goods for these 16 acres is more than was paid when Manhattan Island was sold, but we know that land values have risen over the years (40).

The wish to be “fair and honorable” conveys the same rhetorical position we see in Article 1 of the “Treaty of Fort Laramie.” Yet only a little historical information is needed to understand that the apparent generosity in the sentence about Manhattan Island is actually criticism of the unfair trade of a few goods for land. One of the things I would ask students to consider is what the proclamation writers stand to gain and lose by using the form of satire. Some might say that the sarcasm would be less effective with an audience (U.S. government) that valued the appearance of fairness and reason in written exchanges. Other students, though, might say that because fairness and reason were only an appearance, and because reasoned legal arguments in accepted government courts had not created the desired results for Indians, the Indians who occupied Alcatraz made a wise rhetorical choice.

In class discussion, I think students would see that there wasn't a right or wrong choice to be made by the Indians on Alcatraz Island, and we could discuss some of the

factors in their rhetorical situation that may have influenced their decision-making. For example, the occupiers may have decided on satire because they were actually addressing a different, or additional, audience, that of journalists following the activities of the American Indian Movement. Later, when students write their own texts in the course, they will have developed audience analysis skills that will help them think through their options for writing responses to cultural texts, which might include characters in films or news reports about Native college students.

Lyons recommends that we also study texts from other groups struggling for justice, including “the histories, rhetorics, and struggles of African-Americans and other ‘racial’ or ethnic groups, women, sexual minorities, the disabled, and still others, locating history and writing instruction in the powerful context of American rhetorical struggle” (465). He says the readings would serve multiple purposes, including establishing historical and contemporary contexts of groups struggling for power, in addition to providing models of how individuals and groups have used rhetoric to work toward more justice.

I would add that using these additional texts would also expand students’ understanding of the different rhetorical strategies available, as well as different ways of applying the same strategy. Further, some comparisons would give students a ways to talk about the conflicts between groups working simultaneously against oppression but from different social locations. For example, students could read Susan B. Anthony’s speech at her trial in 1873, where she was fined for voting illegally. Anthony is a well-known advocate for women’s suffrage, but she did not advocate particularly for American Indian women or men. However, she shared some strategies with Sarah

Winnemucca Hopkins, who wrote *Life Among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims*.

At the end of her trial in 1873, Anthony says, “Resistance to tyranny is obedience to God.” With these words, Anthony makes a moral appeal to a Christian audience.

Students would see a similar appeal from Sarah Winnemucca, who also challenges the Christian values of her readers. In Anthony’s case, the appeal is used to endorse the use of illegal behavior in protest of an unjust law. In Winnemucca’s case, the moral appeal to a Christian audience is to shame them into opposing Indian removal to reservations. Such a comparison would provide students with a way of identifying intersections among groups that appeared to be disconnected, while also highlighting the lack of solidarity among groups working simultaneously toward related goals. These are some of the specific ways that such readings could provide context for the study of American Indian rhetoric.

In addition, working with companion texts that advocate for different ways of understanding a concept or situation could help students to see more clearly what Malea Powell explains in “Down by the River, Or How Susan La Flesche Picotte Can Teach Us about Alliance as a Practice of Survivance.” In this essay, Powell directs us to the ways in which American Indians have used language to advocate for their nations within ongoing relationships characterized by unequal power. Powell explains the ways in which Dr. La Flesche Picotte used rhetoric for “alliance and adaptation” in her correspondence with the Women’s National Indian Organization, with the goal of maintaining the Omaha community and improving their quality of life. Taking direction from La Flesche, Powell argues that we need to find ways of communicating constructively, because we depend on each other more than we often realize.

We need a new language, one that doesn't convince us of our unutterable and ongoing differences, one that doesn't force us to see one another as competitors. We need a language that allows us to imagine respectful and reciprocal relationships that acknowledge the degree to which we need one another (have needed one another) in order to survive and flourish (41).

Powell says this fundamental need is one reason for all of us to study American Indian rhetoric, where we can find many models for this kind of language. She explains that La Flesche's rhetoric is one example of how to successfully negotiate interactions characterized by interdependence and shifting power. Later in this chapter, I describe one assignment in which students could read Sarah Winnemucca's *Life among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims*, and learn a great deal about how she used rhetoric within such a relationship (see Powell's "Down by the River" for analysis of Winnemucca's text). However, as I described earlier in this chapter, it would also be useful to contextualize Winnemucca's use of rhetoric with a text that gives an example of how her audience used rhetoric either with or about her.

For example, Alice Fletcher was a non-Native ethnologist who studied the life and culture of the Omaha and Lakota peoples. Her field diary, "Camping with the Sioux: Fieldwork Diary of Alice Cunningham Fletcher," is a record of her impressions of and experiences with the Lakota in the fall of 1881, just two years earlier than Winnemucca published her book about the Paiutes. During this time, Winnemucca traveled widely to raise money for an Indian school, and Fletcher was just the kind of patron Winnemucca would have wanted to influence. It would be particularly interesting to read texts in which Fletcher advocated for the Dawes Act, which resulted in the loss of land and

associated wealth and power, in addition to many cultural losses. How did Fletcher position Indians and non-Indians in that text? In what ways is Winnemucca's text a response to Fletcher's within a larger conversation about the "Indian question" or removal? What sort of conversation are they having? What do they each leave out, and why might they have done so? Are there particular word choices or examples that might have been strategic because their audience included each other?

While a detailed analysis of correspondences and differences between the two rhetors' texts is better left for another project, these examples illustrate that using companion rhetorical texts can present students with a fuller picture of the historical context and the rhetorical dialog in which a document is written. In addition, when the companion text represents an opposing viewpoint contemporary with the American Indian text, students can analyze strategic responses in context. Finally, texts from rhetors who are also resisting inequality can also be instructive. A postindian rhetor would not feel bound to one tradition only; instead, such a rhetor would move freely among them all, modifying and combining strategies wherever it would be useful to do so.

Class Discussions

In regard to how I would manage discussion of texts in the classroom, I would use the model suggested by Lisa King in "Rhetorical Sovereignty and Rhetorical Alliance in the Writing Classroom: Using American Indian Texts." King urges educators who use such texts to pay close attention to Indian history and location, but she also says that is not enough. Instead, we need to teach "the context of American Indian survivance, that is, the act of American Indian survival (which often makes use of what the interloper brings) and resistance (which strives to avert the interloper's influence) together" (217).

She outlines a list of questions for helping students to understand how a text is working rhetorically toward both goals at the same time.

Together, King's questions about sovereignty and alliance offer students a way to understand how writers/speakers are able to assert their own positions and resist the unwanted imposition of power, all within ongoing relationships. Having learned about the rhetorical choices others have made, students could then use those strategies in their own writing. Similar to Bakhtin's concept of internally persuasive discourse, students would be observing the way in which others engage in dialog, and then internalizing those "moves" and using them for purposes of their own.

Writing Assignments

The assignment sequence I am recommending has two parts. In the first part, students would write their own rhetoric of resistance. In this writing, students would address a particular audience and issue, using one of the readings as a model for rhetorical strategies. In the second part, students would describe their rhetorical choices and reflect on the limitations of the strategies they used, as well as what else they need to learn.

For example, students might read Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins' *Life Among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims*. In this first person narrative, Winnemucca describes the interactions between the Paiutes and the United States government, from Winnemucca's complex position as a member of the Paiute nation and as a translator for the government. As Brandt would describe it, Winnemucca was sponsored by the US government, which needed her to translate, and she assimilated her literacy in English in order to advocate for her tribe. As Powell describes in "Rhetorics of Survivance: How

American Indians Use Writing,” Winnemucca (and also Charles Eastman) uses the “discourse of Indian-ness” to participate in—and influence—public conversations about what it means to be Indian. Powell explains why this is significant.

My point is that even though we received the tools of Euroamerican cultural participation in a less than generous fashion, Native peoples have used the very policies and beliefs about ‘the Indian’ meant to remove, reserve, assimilate, acculturate, abrogate, and un-see us as the primary tools through which to reconceive our history, to reimagine Indian-ness in our own varying and multiplicitous images, to create and re-create our presence on this continent (428).

Students could use the questions articulated by Lisa King to help them analyze the ways in which Winnemucca accomplishes these objectives. When students see some of the ways in which Winnemucca asserts sovereignty through language, i.e. by challenging readers’ understanding of “Indian-ness,” and when they see how she simultaneously builds a relationship with readers, then students will have developed a model for their own writing.

For example, students might look closely at the passage in which Winnemucca describes the forced relocation of her tribe. (See Powell for more comprehensive analysis of Winnemucca’s rhetoric in the book; our purpose here is to notice specific instances of rhetorical strategies which students could model in their own writing.) Having told the reader of many deaths during the march and the abandonment of the dead along the sides of the mountain trail, Winnemucca describes what happened when the survivors reached the Yakima Reservation. I would ask students to notice the way in which Winnemucca uses the word “civilized.”

At the end of the ten days we were turned over to Father Wilbur and his civilized Indians, as he called them. Well, as I was saying, we were turned over to him as if we were so many horses or cattle. After he received us he had some of his civilized Indians come with their wagons to take us up to Fort Simcoe. They did not come because they loved us, or because they were Christians. No; they were just like all civilized people; they came to take us up there because they were to be paid for it. They had a kind of shed made to put us in. You know what kind of shed you make for your stock in winter time. It was that kind. Oh, how we did suffer with cold. There was no wood, and the snow was waist-deep, and many died off just as cattle or horses do after travelling so long in the cold (Chapter VIII).

In class discussion, I would ask students to look at the multiple meanings possible for “civilized,” for both Winnemucca and her readers. We would talk then about how she uses the term in this excerpt to argue for a particular perspective, and what she might gain and lose with her choice to use the term “civilized” in this way.

For example, I would expect discussion to include some notice of the initial association Winnemucca creates between the religious white man, Father Wilbur, and “his civilized Indians.” At the outset, she implicitly acknowledges a common rationale for colonization, that whites are morally obligated to civilize the “savages” of the nation. Father Wilbur has presumably had the desired effect of civilizing the savages for whom he had paternal responsibility. But Winnemucca quickly challenges this notion of who is civilized, and what it means to be civilized, when she writes, “They did not come because they loved us, or because they were Christians. No; they were just like all civilized

people; they came to take us up there because they were to be paid for it.” She turns the term around so the reader can see that the word “civilized” is defined by inhumane treatment motivated by greed.

Class discussion of Winnemucca’s choices with the term would include consideration of possible effects on her readers. At the same time that she challenges the use of “civilized,” Winnemucca appeals to her readers, most of whom (at the time of publication) would identify themselves as civilized and Christian. She implies that people who are genuinely good would neither do nor allow the things that Father Wilbur does. Her use of the direct address to the reader emphasizes this association (see Powell). When Winnemucca describes living conditions for the Paiutes, she writes, “You know what kind of shed you make for stock in the winter time. It was that kind.” By pointing to what the readers make for stock, which is the same as what Father Wilbur and “his” Indians did, she puts the readers in the uncomfortable position of seeing one way, at least, in which they are like Father Wilbur and “his” Indians. The readers have something in common with these people who housed human beings in a frail shack during the middle of winter.

Finally, class discussion would include attention to the absence of the word “savages.” While she does not use the word “savages” in this excerpt (though she does elsewhere in the book), the reader understands that Winnemucca is asking, in effect, “Who is the savage here?” The readers are responsible for making that connection themselves, which is one of the hazards of Winnemucca’s choices about how she uses the term civilized: the reader might not recognize her unstated implication. Another hazard is that readers might distance themselves from Winnemucca’s critique, because they believe

themselves to be civilized and do not want to be criticized as being in any way like either Father Wilbur or “his” Indians. In class discussion, we would talk about these hazards as part of the reality of rhetoric; our language choices may be strategic but not predictive. Students in the class would discuss the pros and cons of Winnemucca’s choices, and decide whether they think her strategy was sound.

Invariably, students’ evaluations of Winnemucca’s choices would be influenced by their life experiences, as is true for all of us. Some might conclude that Winnemucca’s choices leave little room for white, Christian readers to accept the common explanation for colonization efforts at that time, which were that Indians were savages who needed the civilization brought to them by white Euroamericans. Other students might say that Winnemucca made it too easy for those readers to feel comfortable, that she should have asked them directly to take specific action. Such differences in students’ assessments of the effects of rhetoric would lead to productive discussion about the decisions we make as writers, and the decisions students will make in their own writing. This is where the class would move from work with a text, in which they apply King’s questions and analyze language choices, to the writing that students will do themselves.

Students would begin their writing by identifying one aspect of “Indian-ness” or one representation of Indians that is circulated in contemporary American culture. I would ask them to locate that instance, for example, in a television commercial or magazine advertisement. (If students were looking for ideas, one source could be the documentary, “Reel Injun: On the Trail of the Hollywood Indian.”) Then I would ask students to write about what they would want to challenge in that representation. Students would decide themselves which representations merit their challenge. In other words, I

wouldn't ask the class to try to define the boundaries of Indian identity for all Indians; instead, I would ask individual writers to explain why they thought a representation should be challenged. In that way, the class would avoid creating a "grand narrative" about Indian identity that would inevitably be false.³¹ Finally, I would ask students to identify an audience and a goal, and then write with the forms and strategies that they think would be most effective. They would use texts such as *Winnemucca's* as models.

The same rhetorical moves that students will see in texts from *Winnemucca* and others are also available to students in their own writing. For example, students could choose to use the form of a first person account to create immediacy and appeal to readers' emotions. They could also identify significant terms in an argument and turn them inside-out by showing how they actually mean something different from how they are commonly used. Students could also appeal to readers' fundamental values by showing how certain actions are inconsistent with those values. Of the strategies they see other rhetors using, they would need to select the ones that are most useful for a specific rhetorical situation.

I would include a requirement that students publish their work in some forum. Depending on their goals and target audience, students could publish their writing as a Wikipedia article, an essay they read aloud in front of a camera and then post as a video on YouTube, a letter to a Board of Directors, or a letter to the editor of a newspaper. Publication requires that whatever students write about be related to some public entity, either because that entity is or should be dealing with the student's topic. This second step would be important for students to plan for from the beginning of their writing;

³¹ For more on Indian identity, see Cushman in particular.

students would need to choose a topic that is specific and concrete, so that it can be written about to someone. For example, an essay about stereotypes in general would be more difficult to write well than an essay about the need to include photographs of American Indians in newspaper reports about this year's cohort of new college students.

Finally, I would also require a companion essay in which students describe their use of rhetoric and reflect on possibilities for the future. To begin, I would ask students to describe how they used or adapted rhetoric from the model text. As part of this section of the paper, I would ask students to describe their options, including the strengths and limitations of those options for this particular rhetorical purpose. For example, students might explain that they could have used a first person narrative when writing to the editor of the newspaper, which might have made an emotional impact on the editorial board, but they chose factual information about Natives' high rates of college enrollment and low rates of representation in the newspaper because they thought this strategy would be more persuasive with journalists.

In addition, I would ask students to reflect on the limitations of the strategies they used. What needs are they aware of for which these particular rhetorical strategies might not be effective? The students who state factual information to influence the newspaper to report more on successes of American Indians could describe a scenario in which factual information would be less effective. For example, if students want a local non-profit organization such as Big Brother/Big Sister to recruit more Indian mentors, they might tell first person narratives about a time when they were able to mentor someone who needed it.

Finally, I would also ask students to describe one or more additional topics they

would like to have some influence on, and describe what they would need to know and do in order to create that influence. In other words, what change do they want to see? How could they use language to help create that change? If they don't know how to do that work right now, where might they find models of people who have used rhetoric in that way? In other words, how could students learn additional strategies for survivance through writing?

In writing assignments such as these, students are applying both rhetorical sovereignty and rhetorical alliances. They are claiming and enacting rhetorical sovereignty to the extent that students make choices about the writing they do to influence some conversation within public discourse. I do not claim that students' writing will necessarily have immediate or measurable influence, especially in major legal and political issues. However, I do think that students who write using the strategies of successful rhetors will be more able to advocate for sovereignty for the nations with which they are affiliated. Perhaps students will do that work in some small way through their assignment, and perhaps they will do that work on a broader scale when they graduate from college and gain positions of influence. The point is that the students will choose how to direct their efforts.

Finally, in a course such as this, students are also developing their skills for establishing and strengthening rhetorical alliances. When they write for a specific audience, students are identifying the needs and goals of that audience, and analyzing how those needs and goals are similar to and different from their own. Powell is calling for this kind of analysis in the way we use language: "We need a language that allows us to imagine respectful and reciprocal relationships that acknowledge the degree to which

we need one another (have needed one another) in order to survive and flourish” (Down 41). When students recognize they are writing within relationships of mutual interdependence, they will have choices for how to best meet the needs of all of the people to whom they are responsible.

“New Storiers”³² in Action

As Lyons explains, the consequences of colonization and English-only policies continue to influence how many Natives feel about writing and school. College completion rates are low, and though the reasons for the low rate of graduation are complex, one of the contributing factors could certainly be conflicts that Native students feel about writing. If students could conceptualize themselves as rhetors with agency, they might not only feel more motivated to succeed in college; they might also understand that they are needed. Lyons tells us that everything depends on how we present writing to students.

The four students in this case study are interested in writing that is personal, relational, and reflective. We have to consider what students want if we wish to avoid replicating problematic power relationships via language. But we can’t only give students what they want; that is something other than teaching. Teaching for critical literacy has a goal of enabling students to use language in the interests of social justice. But we do need to start where they are, and show students how their current interests and agency are already connected to social change. Understanding something about what these four students want from writing, we can more effectively plan our approach to teaching writing with rhetorical texts related to self-determination for Indians and others.

³² This is Vizenor’s term, from *Manifest Manners* (viii).

The assimilation policies of the United States government, partially enacted through English education, did not silence all Natives. Though the damage inflicted by the policies is real, Indians are adapting and creating a future for themselves, as individuals and as nations. There have been resisters all along, such as Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins and William Apess and Luther Standing Bear. And some of the resisters today are in our classrooms. Vizenor claims, “English, that coercive language of federal boarding schools, has carried some of the best stories of endurance, the shadows of tribal survivance, and now that same language of dominance bears the creative literature of distinguished postindian authors in the cities” (*Manifest* 106). The Indians are not just on the reservations or in boarding schools, but in the cities and in the suburbs. They are also in our classrooms.

While Elspeth Stuckey is pessimistic about the use of literacy for freedom, Gerald Vizenor has an unshakable confidence in the power of Natives to use English for survivance. He acknowledges the violence of literacy, and he also insists that Natives can use the language for freedom.

The English language has been the linear tongue of colonial discoveries, racial cruelties, invented names, the simulation of tribal cultures, manifest manners, and the unheard literature of dominance in tribal communities; at the same time, this mother tongue of paracolonialism has been a language of invincible imagination and liberation for many tribal people in the postindian world (*Manifest* 105). The violent word need not be the last. Native scholars including Lyons, Powell, King, Gubele and others have used “the mother tongue of paracolonialism” on behalf of sovereignty for their nations and for themselves. Poets and novelists such as Joy Harjo,

Diane Glancy, James Welch and others have used “invincible imagination” to the benefit of “tribal people in the postindian world.” Renee, Kyle, Jeff and Ben are all capable of making their own marks, in their own way; it is up to us, now, to listen and learn, so that we can engage in constructive dialog with these members of our interdependent communities.

Appendices

APPENDIX A

CONTEXT

Research Site

The study was located at a state university (“State U”) in a midsize city in the Midwest.³³ The Carnegie Classification for the university is “Masters Small.”³⁴ State U has an undergraduate enrollment of about 7,000 students. The university admits about 82% of applicants, who have a median composite ACT of 22 and a median score of about 490 for the SAT Verbal and Math. Pell grants (for low income students) are distributed to 27% of first year students. American Indians comprise 1.4% of the student population, which is 81% white. In 2008, the six-year graduate rate for American Indian students was 18%, with a rate of 42% for white students, with a composite rate of 40% for students overall.

State U offered a program for at risk students from 1972-2011, and admitted approximately 20% of State U’s new incoming students. Much like other universities across the country, such as City University of New York, State U disbanded its comprehensive program for at risk students.

When the program was in operation, students could be admitted to State U if they demonstrated academic potential but scored 20 or lower on the ACT composite score and

³³ I refer to the school as “State U” in order to retain a high level of anonymity for student participants.

³⁴ Classification and statistical data about the school are from The Education Trust.

ranked in the lower 50% of their high school class.³⁵ Students completed college courses in math, humanities, and social sciences, which were taught by permanent faculty. All courses earned credit toward graduation, except for one remedial math class. (No other courses are considered remedial or developmental.)

Students with an ACT English subscore of 20 or lower were required to enroll in an Expressive Writing class before enrolling in Expository Writing, which is the required composition course. The ACT organization establishes an English subscore of 18 as the indicator of college readiness. In the program, however, only students who score 21 and above are presumed ready for college composition. Most students in this program, though not all, took the Expressive Writing course. The next course in the sequence, Expository Writing, fulfilled the general education requirements at State U. Students in Expressive Writing earned three credits, which counted toward graduation as elective credits.

The program was physically located in a building that was initially designed as a dining center, and was located near the residential halls on one end of campus. The building also housed another academic program, including offices and classrooms. Program facilities included six classrooms, a large common area with tables and chairs for socializing and studying, a kitchen, a program office, and one office for each faculty member. All program classes were held in this building.

I interviewed students in my office, where we also had many informal conversations. My office has typical furnishings, such as a desk and chair, file cabinets, and bookshelves. I also have art on the walls, including one framed print from an American Indian art exhibit at the Minneapolis Institute of Art. When I interviewed

³⁵ No statistics are available about the percentage of students from Indians Reservations who enrolled in the program, rather than in State U as general admits.

students, I asked them to take the seat more often associated with authority, that is, my seat behind the desk. I did this in part to interrupt our teacher-student roles. When I sat in the less expensive chair on the other side of the desk, I meant to physically emphasize that I was listening to whatever they wanted to say; as much as possible I wanted students to feel at least equally powerful in the interview setting.

Participants

The four students in my study grew up on reservations and came directly from those reservations to State U as first-year students who had just graduated high school the previous spring. The three from Standing Rock Sioux reservation in North Dakota are Kyle, Jeff, and Renee. For the first couple weeks, the three of them sat together in class. For the rest of the year, the two young men were almost constantly together, while Renee was more likely to sit elsewhere and interact more with other students in the class. The fourth student, Ben, is from White Earth Reservation in Minnesota. He was in my class the next fall, so he did not have an opportunity to interact with the other three.

Detailed information about each student and our interaction is located in a separate appendix for each student. This method of organization is intended to make it easier for readers to reference biographical descriptions as they encounter discussions of the students throughout the chapters.

Researcher

In this section, I am responsible for describing my social locations, in order to help the reader situate my project in a particular time and place, to acknowledge that this intellectual material is inevitably focused with a particular interpretive lens. I do so readily, and if Sam Mckegney is right, perhaps too readily.

McKeegney argues that non-Natives who are working with American Indian literature are often mistaken in the ways they interpret and present their position as non-Natives. He argues that while it is important to be self-reflexive and to acknowledge limitations in one's knowledge about another culture, too many go too far, to the detriment of Indian authors and literature. In the effort to avoid appropriation and misrepresentation of American Indians, non-Natives create other problems, such as making their self-reflexive assessment the focus of the text instead of the literature, or avoiding critique and authoritative statements. McKeegney argues that, instead, allies need to engage critically with Native texts of all kinds, as a matter of respect as well as responsibility. McKeegney makes important points that are also relevant to non-Natives in rhetoric and composition, and I am writing this section differently because of them.

But we are not yet living in a post-racial world, nor do I expect that class, gender or other categories will ever recede from the scenes in which power is negotiated on a daily basis. For this reason, I identify myself as a non-Indian researcher and teacher throughout this project. In fact, my social location is part of the reason for this project in the first place. My teaching inevitably reflects my white privilege. It also reflects my gender, class, and life experiences, all of which, taken together, create a particular worldview. Because I want to be effective as a teacher, I am motivated to identify ways in which my social locations limit my ability to teach, and then to learn how to modify those limits. This project is a result of my interest in modifying my teaching so that American Indian students will be more likely to recognize, increase, and use the power available to them through writing.

APPENDIX B

METHODS

Action Research

This study is an action research project. Action research is an interdisciplinary theory and method that is used in education, social sciences, and other fields. Action research is guided by the philosophy that any human problem is best “understood and changed if one involved the members of the system in the inquiry process itself” (David Coghlan, qtd by Brydon-Miller et al 14). In this study, I asked American Indian students themselves about their writing experiences. Ernie Stringer explains that the goal of action research is to “provide people with the support and resources to do things in ways that will fit their own cultural context and their own lifestyles. The people, we knew, not the experts, should be the ones to determine the nature and operation of the things that affected their lives” (qtd Brydon-Miller 14). Thus, the philosophy underlying action research corresponds appropriately with the goal of self-determination for American Indian peoples, including rhetorical sovereignty (see Lyons).

In addition, “classroom action research” is characterized by involvement on the part of the researcher. In this form of action research, teachers use “qualitative interpretive modes of inquiry and data collection,” for the purpose of improving teaching. Kemmis and McTaggart explain that, “The emphasis is ‘practical,’ that is, on the interpretations that teachers and students are making and acting on in the situation. In other words, classroom action research is ... practical in Aristotle’s sense of practical

reasoning about how to act rightly and properly in a situation with which one is confronted” (274). The goal of my project is pedagogical, to improve the practice of college writing instruction for American Indian students. In addition, this project is related to “critical action research,” which critiques “the way in which language is used,” as well as “organization and power in a local situation” and which also takes “action to improve things” (273). Throughout this case study, I focus on questions of agency, particularly as they relate to language use, and especially as they relate to Vizenor’s concept of survivance. Further, in the final chapter, I discuss ways in which teaching could support and encourage students to use and develop their power by writing their own rhetoric of resistance.

Finally, action research is based partially on the idea that research projects should develop reflexively. Kurt Lewin describes research as “a spiral of steps each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action, and fact-finding about the result of the action” (38). In other words, research should include planning, then acting, the re-evaluating, then acting again. That is how this project, in fact, progressed.

I found useful methodology in discussions of case studies. Anne Haas Dyson and Celia Genishi describe the purpose of case studies, methods of collecting and analyzing data, and criticisms of case studies. In a case study, you examine not a universal experience (as if there were one), but instead, you examine the “local particulars of some abstract phenomenon” (93). In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Clifford Geertz explains that in a case, researchers observe a particular instance of a phenomenon, but not the phenomenon itself. In my project, I am learning about a particular instance of American Indians using writing, but I am not able to study the general phenomenon of American

Indians writing, or the general phenomenon of writing. I am interested in these abstract phenomena, but I cannot actually study them.

A general, abstract phenomenon will always appear to vary when observed within different social and cultural contexts. We can learn about one manifestation of an abstract phenomenon in a particular place and time. This project is a study of four American Indian college student writers. It is important to recognize that the experiences of these specific students in this particular context may be irrelevant to students elsewhere. Yet the study is important because we know so little about any aspect of American Indian college students and their writing, particularly at non-tribal colleges. Although we cannot know the whole phenomenon, it is still important to study the small part that is available to us.

Furthermore, case studies do not establish correlations or cause and effect relationships between isolated variables. In the words of Dyson and Genishi, “Singular case studies do not aim to determine context-free associations between methodological input and achievement data” (11). In the past, positivistic scientific methods have been considered means of discovering “The Truth.” However, in composition and rhetoric, postmodern theory assumes that there is not one Truth, but many versions of what is true that are also changeable, depending on the context.

In the complex world of human learning related to writing, I cannot control variables and measure outcomes in order to discover a replicable Truth. My study does not attempt to describe any type of writing as a means of creating specific results for all Indigenous students. As the saying goes, you can never dip into the same river twice. However, we can learn something about the river by closely examining the water in our

cupped hands, and noticing when, where and how we gathered the water in the first place.

Finally, I would like to note that my project is not an ethnographic study. For some, the fact that my study includes the intersection of culture and writing makes this an ethnographic study. However, the specific methods and conditions of my study exclude it from that category. Ethnography is a qualitative study design specific to cultural anthropology, characterized by immersion in and study of a group. While this may be an accurate term for some composition research, my study is not of a group, not of a culture, and not conducted from the vantage point of immersion. Instead, I am learning from interactions with four students. These interactions occurred approximately 3-5 days per week, for no more than two hours each time, over the course of an academic year. I observed only a tiny portion of students' lives during that time. In fact, I am conducting the study in part because the students are removed from their home culture, and immersed in both university and non-Indian cultures.

In addition, as the researcher I played a major role in shaping every interaction with the students. I designed the course, I evaluated the papers, and I asked the questions. Although my interest is primarily in the experiences of the students, this project inevitably includes me. The students' responses to me, whether verbally or in writing, are inevitably shaped by my literal or figurative presence. In fact, part of the exigency for this project is that non-Indians are teaching Indians in our classrooms, and compositionists don't know much about the challenges and opportunities therein. Every aspect of this project should be understood as emerging from the interaction of a non-Indian teacher/researcher and American Indian student writers. For all of these reasons, my project is not an ethnography.

Development of the Project

I began this project with a broad interest in all college students' experiences with personal writing, particularly in regard to how it affected them emotionally. Anecdotally, I had observed that students seemed more comfortable with writing after taking an Expressive Writing class. I selected a sample of 11 college writers, including eight in Expressive Writing and three in Expository Writing.³⁶ I could have focused my study on rural students, or students with certain writing practices or patterns, or students with certain attitudes about education. However, I was interested in learning about a broad range of students, so I selected students with a variety of skill levels and attitudes about writing. Within that group of 11, there were three American Indian students. At the time, I thought in general terms that I might learn something about the interaction of culture and writing, because they were all from the same reservation and had known each other most of their lives.

I interviewed all 11 students at the beginning of fall semester and again at the end of the semester. I also collected copies of their writing for class. At the end of spring semester, I interviewed five of the students again, including two of the American Indian students. I describe those interviews at length and work with student responses and their writing throughout this project, but for now, I want to describe the evolution of this study. Although I did not know it when I began, my research followed a common trajectory for qualitative projects. Dyson and Genishi claim that, "Unlike in traditional experiments, the study design is not set from the beginning. The design will come from strategic decision-

³⁶ All participants read and signed a consent form approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at University of North Dakota. The IRB at State U was also formally notified of the study.

making, as one's knowledge of a site and one's particular inquiry interests inform each other” (39). I made changes as both my knowledge and inquiry interests shifted.

By the next academic year, I recognized the importance of the subset of American Indian students in my project. Although the literature about race and class in composition is substantial, very little has been written about the experiences of American Indian college student writers. At the tribal college where I taught in the late 1990s, there was abundant support for students’ cultural identities and practices. Even though I no longer teach in a tribal college, I remain interested in and committed to meaningful education for American Indians in my classes. Is it possible, I wondered, for me, a non-Indian, to support some of those same factors in my state university classroom, even if only in a small way? Were Native students in my classes getting as much of what they needed as was possible? What does writing mean to Indian students at a small state university? How does it change their perceptions of themselves? How does it change their ideas about college? How does it affect their thoughts about home? How do they handle the writing itself? What meaning does their writing have for them?

Because these are important questions, I shifted the frame of my project to a close study of the American Indian participants and their writing. Dyson and Genishi describe qualitative studies as having both a foreground and a background (44). The foreground is the study itself, and the background is the more general problem. In my study, the foreground became the case study of American Indian students in an Expressive Writing class. The background can be characterized as Scott Lyons’ question, “What do American Indians want from writing?” Contributing to that background question are the facts of colonization, the history of American Indian education for assimilation, and the

ways in which writing has been used against as well as by American Indians in the past, as well as how Indigenous people are using writing today. As a result of these changes in my project, I asked one more Native student to participate in my study. He was enrolled in my Expressive Writing class in fall 2010. As with the other participants, I interviewed the student, collected copies of his writing, and kept field notes.

For all participants, I prepared formal interview questions and made appointments for those interviews, but I remained open during the interviews to wherever our conversation led. In some cases, students did not venture into other topics but simply answered my questions, while in other cases, we had several tangential conversations seemingly unrelated to the study. In other words, I learned about much more than I had intended, and the questions I asked students were often just prompts for interaction. In addition to interviews, I also analyzed students' writing after the class ended, looking for themes of their own making, and then returned to that writing to look for anything relevant to scholarly discussion about American Indians and composition.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in a qualitative study is both an inductive and reflexive process, explain Dyson and Genishi. The process is inductive in that data are “sorted and interrelated in order to understand the dimensions and dynamics of some phenomenon as it is enacted by intentional social actors in some time and place” (82). In other words, a researcher surveys all of the fragments of information that is collected and then sorts and rearranges those fragments in order to see what larger picture may be revealed.

Data analysis is also reflexive, in that a researcher analyzes data from within a

particular set of both personal and professional experiences. This includes our race, gender, and class, among other matters of identity. I would expect that my roles and personal characteristics influenced the outcome of this study in multiple ways. First, these characteristics would influence what participants would share with me, verbally or in writing. For example, I would expect that Indian students writing at State U with a non-Native teacher might write differently than they would in a writing classroom at a tribal college with a Native professor.

Second, my personal characteristics will direct my attention toward some words and subjects, and away from others. One of the participants in my study commented a couple of times on matters related to sexual activity. Although I am comfortable talking with students about sexual orientation and gender identity, I'm really not interested in or comfortable with hearing details about their sexual experiences. The participant who made the comments is male, heterosexual, about age 18, and a student. I am female, lesbian, old enough that I don't want to advertise my age, and a professor. There are some things I just don't want to know! This is an amusing example of how my personal characteristics influence my choices about data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

The data for my study include student writing and interview transcriptions, as well as field notes. I used open coding as the method for inductive analysis of data, following the process described by Dyson and Genishi. They write, "In open coding, researchers may mark significant passages in the field notebook and then write in the margins a word or phrase to describe the bracketed information" (85). I used word processing software to create two columns for this process. That is, I typed the interview transcription into the column on the left, and typed my thoughts about the transcribed words into the column

on the right, which was perhaps one-third as wide.³⁷ Ann Berthoff refers to this as the “dialectical notebook” in her article, “How We Construe is How We Construct.” Dyson and Genishi continue, “At the same time, [the researcher] may keep a running list of all descriptors (and pages where they were recorded). Those terms can be reorganized--collapsed, eliminated, related hierarchically, or further differentiated--to develop a more focused category system for coding” (85). I also noted exceptions, i.e. information that did not seem to fit other patterns I was seeing. I saved my list of coding terms in a separate Microsoft Word file. I completed the coding process first with interview transcripts, and then with student writing.

Coding enabled me to see patterns that I had not otherwise identified, even though I was very familiar with all of the data. When I finished coding, I was ready to begin the interpretive work of my project. This is the work of discerning what themes might be present, and what they might mean in this particular context. It was important for me to resist the temptation to tie up all the loose ends and present some kind of coherent narrative. Neat and tidy stories are probably always a distortion, and my goal was to let the students’ words speak for themselves as much as possible. As a result, the themes and stories that emerge from the data are fragmented and occasionally conflicting. In addition, they raise more questions for me than I had when I began.

One of the questions for all qualitative studies is, “What now?” After collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data, what can I do with it? Dyson and Genishi explain that our goals are twofold. First, we want to create opportunities for readers to formulate their

³⁷ I recorded interviews with a handheld digital mp3 player/recorder. I transcribed interviews by playing audio files on one computer with iTunes software, and typing the transcription into another. I found the iTunes software and the touchpad on a MacBook easiest for stopping and replaying the audio files.

own “naturalistic generalizations.” Readers who are given plenty of detail can develop a vicarious sense of the people and context. When they have this sense, “then readers may generalize from experience in private, personal ways, modifying, extending, or adding to their generalized understandings of how the world works” (115). In other words, readers are given the opportunity to compare their perceptions of the study to what they already know. As a result, readers decide for themselves how the study might inform their understanding of a particular, local situation of their own.

The second goal of a qualitative study is to “construct propositional assertions that situate [our study] in larger professional discussions about” the phenomena of interest (115). In other words, the goal is to move from understanding what happened in our particular situation to understanding something about the original phenomenon. As the reader will recall, the study is not the phenomenon itself. These four students cannot tell us “what American Indians want from writing,” or about personal writing in general. Instead, the study may shed light on one small aspect of these phenomena.

Findings in a qualitative study are “a concrete instantiation of a theorized phenomenon” according to Dyson and Genishi. They claim that, “By understanding the particulars of its social enactment (e.g., the relationships entailed, the thematic content and interactional details of its unfolding, the specifics of time and place), the individual instances can be compared to the particulars of other situations” (116). We can compare the details of this study, “the relationships...thematic content...interactional details...[and] the specifics of time and place,” to the circumstances of other instances in which American Indian college students are writing. As a result of that comparison, compositionists may be able to identify strategies, needs, and opportunities in those cases

that would support Native students' efforts toward rhetorical sovereignty.

APPENDIX C

STANDING ROCK AND WHITE EARTH RESERVATIONS

Standing Rock Sioux Reservation

Standing Rock Sioux Reservation is located in both North Dakota and South Dakota, with about half of the reservation in each state. The three Lakota students in my study grew up in or near the North Dakota half of the reservation. The “Sioux” are three separate groups, who lived in different places and had different cultural traditions, but who shared similarities in language. They include the Dakota, Lakota, and the Yankton-Yanktonai. Traditionally, the “Sioux” referred to each other as Dakota, Lakota, or “Koda,” which means friends or allies (Schneider 13). Although the name of the reservation includes the name “Sioux,” many now refer to themselves as Lakota. On Standing Rock, most tribal members are Lakota or Yanktonai. The US Census in 2000 reported a population of 4,044 people in the ND part of the reservation. According to the North Dakota Indian Affairs Commission, American Indians are the largest minority group in North Dakota, and growing. Between 2000 and 2008, the Indian population grew by 12%.

The reservation comprises 2.3 million acres. Of those acres, 849,989 are owned by Indians, 55,993 acres were taken by the creation of Lake Oahe reservoir, and 1,483,000 acres are owned by non-Indians (Schneider 147). The Lake Oahe reservoir was created as part of a larger project to dam and control the flow of the Missouri River. Lake Oahe was a major loss for Standing Rock Indians. First, the land covered was “fertile bottomland and timber areas. The timber had been used to provide fuel, fence posts and

other wood for reservation use” (148). In addition, about 170 family homes were lost. Although homes were either moved or rebuilt elsewhere, this was a significant disruption to families and communities. Lake Oahe also created significant economic disruption. When outsiders complain that American Indians should be completely independent financially from state and federal government, they do not recognize that government decisions, such as the Lake Oahe reservoir, continue to interrupt Indians’ businesses and families.³⁸

The economy on Standing Rock Sioux Reservation is dependent in large part on government employment. Fully 47% of the jobs on the reservation are government positions (U.S. Census). In addition, Prairie Knights Casino is a major employer, and ranching is common. Yet, of all the residents 16 years and older, a full 41.3% were unemployed in 2000. Such a high rate of unemployment will lead to poverty anywhere, and indeed, the poverty rate on Standing Rock is 33.6% for families and 39.2% for individuals. In comparison, the poverty rate in North Dakota overall is 8.3% for families and 11.9% for individuals.

Educational attainment on Standing Rock is lower than for North Dakota overall. While 21.7% of Standing Rock residents over the age of 25 have not earned a high school degree, the rate is 16.1% for North Dakota. A Baccalaureate degree was earned by 7.2% of Standing Rock residents, compared to 16.5% for North Dakota overall. Interestingly,

³⁸ In her discussion about the effects of Lake Oahe and similar projects, Schneider is careful to note that the water changes have the potential to become an asset for the Standing Rock nation. Water can be used to generate hydro-electric power, and can also be a tourism resource. Such projects, though, require funding for infrastructure and advertising. Thus, although Lake Oahe may become a resource to the tribe someday, it has made little positive economic impact so far.

the rate is closer for graduate or professional degrees, which is 3.9% for Standing Rock and 5.5% for North Dakota.

White Earth Reservation

White Earth Reservation occupies 829,440 acres in northwestern Minnesota (Indian Affairs Council). It is one of seven Ojibwe reservations in Minnesota, and one of the six that make up the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe. (The Red Lake band remains independent, i.e. the land was never allotted and remains in full ownership and control of the tribe, subject only to federal law, in addition to its own laws.) The White Earth Reservation is so named for the white clay in the soil of the western half of the reservation. The tribe owns 10% of the land, which is an increase from 6% in 1978. Organized efforts such as the White Earth Land Recovery Project work toward restoration of tribal ownership of land and a return to traditional use of resources.

The economy on the White Earth Reservation is largely dependent on the Shooting Star Casino, as well as government employment. Unemployment is high, though not as high as even twenty years ago. In 2000, labor force participation of all people over 16 on White Earth was 59.6%--which means that 40.4% were unemployed (U.S. Census). In comparison, the employment rate was 72% for Minnesota overall. Obviously, high unemployment leads to a higher rate of poverty. In 1999, 15.9% of families and 20% of individuals on White Earth lived below the poverty level. In comparison, 5.1% of families and 7.9% of individuals in Minnesota lived below the poverty level. Economic development initiatives, of which the casino is the largest and most successful, are a priority for White Earth.

Educational attainment is lower for White Earth Reservation than for Minnesota overall. According to the US Census Bureau, a full 24.3% of the White Earth population over 25 had not earned a high school degree. While 8.2% of the White Earth residents over the age of 25 have earned a Baccalaureate degree, this is less than half the rate of 19.1% for Minnesota residents of the same age. However, in 1997 the tribe created its own college, the White Earth Tribal and Community College. The college offers Associates degrees, including one in Native Studies, and partners with the other colleges that offer Baccalaureate degrees.

Health Concerns for all American Indians

The White Earth Reservation Tribal Council declared a public health emergency on January 31, 2011. Chairwoman Erma J. Vizenor and the Council issued the “Declaration of a Public Health Emergency with Respect to Prescription Medication and Illegal Drug Abuse” (Anishinaabeg Today). The declaration states, in part:

The abuse of prescription medication and illegal drugs has been well documented on the White Earth Reservation. The impacts of this drug abuse are being felt in our homes, in our schools, in our workplace and in our daily lives. The devastation from this drug abuse is fragmenting our families, contributes to the neglect of our children and threatens to destroy our communities. The usage has risen to crisis proportions and threatens the health, welfare and safety of all the residents of the White Earth Reservation (6).

Vizenor emphasizes that prescription drug abuse is a national issue, not unique to White Earth. However, the tribe has determined that prescription drug abuse is destroying

individuals, families, and communities.³⁹ The urgency suggested by this Declaration is a local manifestation of the many health crises that Natives are dealing with on virtually all reservations.

Indian Health Services (IHS), the government health program for American Indian and Alaskan Natives, reports that injuries, methamphetamine use, and suicide are the greatest threats for Native people. Until age 44, an American Indian is at the greatest risk of death from injuries. “Risk factors that contribute to the disproportionately higher injury rates among American Indians and Alaska Natives include a greater proportion of young adults as compared to other Americans, rural environments and lack of traffic safety legislation, and a greater number of alcohol related incidents.”

Suicide is the second leading cause of death for young people age 15-24 on reservations. Native youth are 3.5 times more likely to commit suicide than people of the same age in the general U. S. population. For explanation, the IHS points to “substance abuse, trauma, forced cultural change, poverty, lack of economic opportunity, and limited access to services.” Tribes and the IHS are working on many initiatives to prevent suicide. The IHS reports that factors effective in preventing suicide of youth include “...their sense of belonging to their culture, strong tribal spiritual orientation, and cultural continuity.” In other words, Native youth need the exact opposite of former U.S. assimilation policies, which required them to abandon their culture and communities. American Indian youth depend on the strength of tribal culture for their very lives.

³⁹ The Declaration is an interesting example of rhetorical sovereignty; further details reveal efforts the tribe is making to hold various government agencies accountable for responding to the needs of the tribe. In addition, the tribe has directed its attorney to investigate all options for holding pharmaceutical companies responsible for “educational, financial, logistical and legal solutions in addressing and removing this problem” (1).

APPENDIX D

BEN

Ben is a quiet young man, of average height with slim build. His hair is cut close to his head, so his brown eyes are especially noticeable. His voice is soft, and he often seems nervous. When he smiles, usually his lips remain together, which makes him look sad. But when he laughs, he doesn't cover his mouth, as some shy people do. However, I don't recall seeing him laugh often. I would say Ben was sad most of the days that I saw him, and that is understandable, given the number of deaths he was grieving during the semester.

I had noticed Ben right away; as with Renee and Jeff, he appeared to be Native and so I wanted to make a special effort to create a connection with him, to contribute to the likelihood that he would do well in the class and remain in school. Ben is Ojibwe, from White Earth Reservation in Minnesota. One of our first conversations was about wild rice. I had asked him where he was from, and when he said White Earth, I told him that a friend of mine had filmed a documentary about ricing in the White Earth area. I was planning to show the film in one of my classes that semester. He said he was going home that weekend to help with the rice harvest, and that he was excited about it. I told him to stop by my office sometime, and I would show the film to him. Within the week, he stopped in.

I pulled the DVD case from my desk and handed it to him. Ben raised his eyebrows and seemed excited. "This is where I am from. This is my home." The film is

“Mino-Bimadiziwin: Ojibwe wild rice harvesting in Minnesota,” by Deb Wallwork. I explained that Deb is an old friend, and I had just seen her this past summer. I asked Ben how to pronounce the title, “Mino-Bimadiziwin” (which means “The Good Life”), and he said the words aloud. He said he would like to show the DVD to his brother, and I said he could take it with him as long as he promised to bring it back within a couple weeks, so I could use it in my class.

Ben returned after the next weekend with the DVD and a smile on his face. “We know these people,” he said, about the family featured in the documentary. “We know them,” he repeated. The film meant something to him, and I felt like we had established a meaningful connection, based in something that was important to him.

About a week later, Ben stopped into my office and told me that he would be missing the next scheduled class. He had to go home for a funeral. When I asked, he said that his cousin died. I asked if he was close to his cousin, knowing he probably was; Ben hesitated and said, “He was like my brother. We grew up together.” He said that no one knew why his cousin had died, that he just didn’t wake up one morning. His cousin was 19. In a later conversation, Ben said the cause of death was “a bad combination of pills.” No one seemed to know if it was an overdose or an interaction of different kinds of medication his cousin had been prescribed.

Not two weeks later, Ben said he would be missing class again. This time, his uncle had died—the father of the cousin Ben had just lost. As with the son, the uncle didn’t wake up one morning, apparently because of a combination of alcohol and pills. Again, no one knew whether the death was intentional or accidental. Ben sat sideways in his chair while he told me these few details, facing the door. He looked down at the floor,

rubbed his hands together, looked at his hands. He spoke softly, in phrases more often than sentences.

We talked a little about grief. We talked about the shock of finding oneself still alive when the rest of the world has fundamentally changed, because that person is no longer in it. Well, I talked about these things. Ben nodded. He didn't seem to want to leave my office, but he didn't seem to want to say much, either. I mentioned a counselor on campus that I had told him about before. I told him that she was starting a Grief Group for students, and I asked if he was interested. He said he was.

Near the end of the semester, another cousin died. This cousin, in her early 20s, died in a car accident. She had been drinking. She had two small children, who would now be taken care of by other relatives. "Oh," Ben said, "and my dog died, too." He smiled a little, tilted his head to one side and shrugged his shoulder. I wondered how much grief one person can take.

In spite of these and other tragedies, which he wrote about in his papers, Ben had a successful semester. Ben was nearly always in class; he completed his work, including revisions of papers when necessary; and he earned all the credits for the class. At the end of the semester, I wished him a "boring, uneventful" break, and he laughed. "That would be good," he said.

APPENDIX E

JEFF

Jeff came to State U with his girlfriend and his two best friends, one of whom was Kyle. Jeff was tall and thin, with dark curly hair, brown eyes, and a ready smile. What I noticed first about Jeff's personality is that he was curious. During the first interviews I conducted with students, I tried to use a transcription system. This meant that students wore a headset connected by cord to a computer while they spoke, and they completed a five-minute "training" of the software so it would recognize each person's voice.⁴⁰

Jeff was very curious about what the software was for and how it worked, as well as how else it might be used. He had never heard of the technology, and he was interested in how it could be used by students. Of the eleven students who used the transcription system during that first round of interviews, Jeff expressed the most interest in it, with comments and questions. One of his comments was that he thought software like this would really help him to write papers, because it was so much easier for him to talk than write. I said I had wondered if it wouldn't be useful for some people when they were generating a first draft. I also said that after I finished my current research project, I was thinking I might study exactly that process of students generating material for papers (i.e. rough drafts) by talking aloud and having their words transcribed for them. Jeff said he would want to participate in such a project.

⁴⁰ The software was a great idea that did not work well at all. The transcriptions were gibberish, and I abandoned the technology for all later interviews.

We talked through some of the details of this potential study. For example, Jeff asked about the expense of the system, and when I told him, he said college students wouldn't be able to afford that. I said I could write a grant proposal to come up with funding. Then, every student registered for a certain section of a class could be assigned one system for the duration of a semester. He really liked that idea, and thought it would help students, but, he asked, wouldn't that be cheating, really, to say the words instead of write them? I said I didn't think so at all, that the technology of getting words on paper was much less important than the words you end up with, just like typing on a computer isn't cheating even though it is much easier than handwriting or old-fashioned typewriters. That made sense to him. I also said that because of the difference in language patterns when we talk compared to when we write, the transcription would probably be more useful for early drafts, and he could see how this would probably be true for him.

The particular details of the conversation are not important, but the extent of Jeff's curiosity surprised me at the time, and is memorable to me now. This was a memorable conversation in part because of the contrast to our conversations near the end of the academic year. Jeff experienced some successes, as well as some disappointments in his first year of college.

Jeff had wanted to attend State U since he was in Junior High, when his class visited the school for a college tour. He told me that he had really wanted to go away to college, because he was likely to spend the rest of his life on Standing Rock, and he wanted to experience life in another place for a while. However, Jeff did not have any direction in regard to a college major or career. He knew that he liked to play video games and he knew he wanted to earn a lot of money; in these respects, he was like many

first year students who are young men. However, Jeff said his family owns a ranch that had been in the family for a couple generations, and that he knew his dad expected him to take over the ranch someday. The problem is that he doesn't want to. He knows the work, and knows he could be successful. But Jeff is not interested in ranching. He said he didn't want to live out in the middle of nowhere and cut hay and raise cattle. But, he said, this is what his father expected, and he didn't want to disappoint him. Besides that, Jeff said, he didn't know what else he wanted to do.

Although Jeff and I had many conversations about his future vocation, and I referred him to several resources for career exploration, I am not aware that he made any progress at all on this issue during the year. However, the one thing that Jeff knew for sure was that he wanted a college education. He didn't know what he wanted to do with it when he was done, but he said he wanted to "do something" with his life, and not "just sit at home on Standing Rock" for the rest of his days. Although Jeff said he wanted to graduate from State U, he also said he would probably transfer to another college closer to home, "for a while."

When Jeff talked about transferring to another college closer to home, he cited two reasons. The first was financial, and the second was his mom. Jeff said many times during the year that his mom was "after him" to move back home, and that he did not want to. Though he didn't want to disappoint his mother, he also really wanted to continue at State U. However, Jeff also mentioned finances as another reason he might move back home. He said that it was expensive to live away from home, as he was doing, and that he just couldn't afford it. Jeff was using school loans, in part, to pay for college, and he was worried about paying them back.

Finances were a frequent concern for Jeff. Midway through the fall semester, I noticed that, for a number of days, he had not been joking with Kyle or with me before or after class, as he normally would have, and I also hadn't seen him smile much. I commented on the change to him, and asked if something was up. Jeff explained that his computer had crashed. As a result, he hadn't been able to play "World of Warcraft" online. Not only was he a fanatic of the game, but he had been playing the game online with his dad nearly every day since he had arrived at State U. Now, unlike many first year college students, Jeff did not drink alcohol; he said he never had. He did, however, play video games all night, sometimes, and he admitted that he suffered consequences for how much he played. He jokingly referred to himself as addicted to Warcraft. I wondered about that, sometimes, when he was struggling to complete class work that he was clearly capable of doing. Several times during the year he said that if he hadn't been playing Warcraft so much, he would have done better on an assignment or in a class.

Without access to the game, Jeff also didn't have his customary daily connection with his father. Jeff and his dad are close, and when he talked about his father, it was usually related to something about respect for how hard his dad works, or not wanting to disappoint his dad. Playing Warcraft online with his dad was an important part of Jeff's day. As a result of the laptop crash, Jeff was feeling some isolation from family, besides missing his daily fix of the game.

Jeff told me that in a few weeks, his dad was going to send him some money to replace his laptop, and we talked about what kind of laptop was best for gaming. However, after asking a couple times about whether he had replaced the laptop, and after hearing that no, his dad hadn't sent the money yet, I stopped asking. I didn't want him to

feel embarrassed. Jeff also didn't have a cell phone at this time; he said his phone wasn't working and he needed a new one, but that he couldn't afford to replace it at the time. So Jeff didn't have a telephone connection with his dad, either, and all these factors together seemed to be taking a toll.

Jeff's financial struggles continued to affect him throughout the year. He registered late for spring classes, because of a hold on registration related to an unpaid bill from fall. Jeff and Kyle both took a second class from me during spring 2010, so we continued to interact weekly, at least, through the end of the year. About midway through spring semester, Jeff went through a particularly rough time, though he didn't talk to me much about it. I know that there were issues with his girlfriend (she broke up with him for a while, though they got back together later). Jeff also lost some papers and books when he accidentally spilled a bottle of pop in his backpack (the cap on a Mountain Dew bottle was not screwed on all the way). The resulting mess meant that Jeff didn't have homework ready to turn in for classes. On the upside, he had saved drafts of everything to a flash drive.

Unfortunately, Jeff had forgotten the flash drive at home during a recent visit. Jeff asked his dad to mail the flash drive to him, and his dad said he would. Jeff waited, and the flash drive did not arrive. In the meantime, papers were due, and then overdue, and Jeff was getting pretty far behind. When I checked in with Jeff about the papers that were due for my class, I suggested that maybe his dad could attach files to an e-mail instead of mailing the flash drive. However, Jeff said the computer at home wasn't working. He never did receive the flash drive with his papers on it.

I don't know the details of the situation, but Jeff seemed pretty unhappy with the fact that his dad said he would send the flash drive to him, but didn't mail it. He also seemed stressed about not turning in his homework. Understandably, Jeff did not want to rewrite his papers. He seemed to be waiting for the flash drive in order to avoid rewriting the papers, but at the end of the semester when the flash drive still had not arrived, Jeff seemed unable to summon the will to rewrite the assignments. As a result, he only earned partial credit in his class with me spring semester (as per the program system, in which students earned 1-3 credits with a grade of "Pass").

Jeff had begun the year eagerly, seeming both intellectually curious and engaged. At the end of the year, he seemed depressed, still lacked direction for a major or career, and seemed to give up on school. He told me that the fault was his, that he had all the resources there at State U that he could want, and that he just had to make himself do the work. He never blamed anyone else. Jeff always said the responsibility was his and his alone.

When we parted in May, Jeff intended to transfer to a public college closer to home. He asked if I would always be at my State U e-mail address, and I interpreted his question as a desire to stay in contact. I told him that I will always be glad to hear from him, and that if I can be a resource in any way I will want to be. I gave him my card, and reminded him that he could always find me in the State U directly online.

APPENDIX F

KYLE

Kyle is a tall and thin young man, with sandy-colored hair and gray-blue eyes. He is friendly, easy-going, and quick with a smile. He also appeared to have an even temperament, in that he seemed pretty much the same all year, both in his demeanor and his behavior. Kyle struggled with procrastination, like his friend Jeff. But unlike Jeff, Kyle always got the work done eventually, and at a high enough level of quality to pass.

While I quickly concluded that the other three students were likely to be Native from their appearance and speech patterns, I did not come to this conclusion as quickly with Kyle. His appearance did not suggest to me that he is Native, although I am aware that appearance gives limited information. I have had several friends over the years who are Native and who do not have the darker hair, skin or eyes that are common among Indigenous people, in varying degrees. My friend Barb is Ojibwe, from near White Earth, Minnesota. Her skin is lighter than mine, her eyes are blue, and her hair is blond. She is the only one in her family who has these characteristics; all of her sisters and her parents have many of the features more common to Ojibwe Indians. Yet Barb is as Indian as her sisters. So, I know that appearance doesn't necessarily indicate anything about tribal affiliation or identity.

Kyle said that he is from Standing Rock, and that he lived there his whole life. Non-Indians do live on reservations, though perhaps not as often in small towns populated mostly by Natives, such as the one Kyle grew up in. I recognized Kyle's last

name as a relatively common family name in the area, and when I taught at a tribal college, I had one student who shared Kyle's last name and who was Indian. Finally, Kyle also said that he was a member of a group for American Indian youth, all through high school. I asked no one in this study whether he or she was officially enrolled in a tribe, and certainly didn't ask about blood quantum or lineage traceable through the Dawes or other such membership rolls. Instead, they all grew up on reservations, immersed in and part of Indian communities.

Of the four, I probably know the least about Kyle. He and I had fewer in-depth conversations outside of class. He didn't seem to need or want much from me, though he was always friendly and approachable. I felt closer to some students than others, including others of those in the larger group of my study participants. Of the American Indian participants, though, I was probably closer to Jeff and Ben, because of our conversations, and Renee, because of her writing. Kyle answered my questions, and was always pleasant, and so we just had this average kind of connection.

Kyle told me he enrolled at State U because his friends did. Like Jeff and his other friend, he wanted to live away from Standing Rock for a while, but he didn't feel a particular connection to State U. He was just with his friends, and open to a new adventure.

In some of his early in-class writing, Kyle mentioned that his parents were very supportive of him going to college, and that they had purchased a car and a laptop for him. He said that driving in this town was a challenge for him. The driving is certainly different from the sort of driving one does on Standing Rock, where there are fewer cars on the road. When I taught in Fort Yates, the largest town on the reservation, there was

only one traffic light. At State U, there were probably as many cars in Kyle's dormitory parking lot as there were in all of his hometown. When I mentioned this to Kyle one day, he laughed.

By the end of fall semester, Kyle said he was pretty used to driving in the "big city" where State U is located. He seemed to enjoy having a car, though he wrote briefly in one paper about how he wished he was not the only one of his friends who had a car, because he gave so many rides to others, so often. Overall, though, Kyle seemed to adjust well to college and be happy with his experience at State U.

At some point during fall semester, though, Kyle decided that he would transfer to a public college closer to home after he completed one year at State U. Like his friend Jeff, he cited financial incentives for living closer to home. But Kyle also had something to transfer into: the college offered a specific major that would lead to a specific job that Kyle wanted.

When I interviewed Kyle for the last time at the end of the year, I presented him with a container of his favorite cookies, which he had told me were chocolate chip. He was surprised, and thanked me. He took a cookie, and then held the container out as if to give it back to me. "Kyle," I said, "those are for you. All of them." He seemed genuinely surprised and appreciative of this simple thank you gift. I offer the story as an anecdote to give the reader a sense of how unassuming and warm Kyle is.

APPENDIX G

RENEE

Renee is the first of the four students that I met. She attended the summer pre-registration event held by State U for first year students. Renee was with 12-15 other students in one of the two computer labs on the lower level of the program building. Each was sitting in front of a computer in a lab with about a dozen computers, registering online for the courses they had selected earlier for their fall schedules. I noticed Renee because she looked like she is probably Native, with features similar to others I know who are Indian; in general terms, she has medium brown skin, dark brown eyes and dark brown hair. Having taught at a tribal college, I am particularly interested in the success of Indian students, so maybe I noticed her for that reason.

I was in the computer lab that day because faculty who taught in the program attended all pre-registration events such as these, in order to establish themselves immediately as resources for students. Renee had a question about the registration process, and as we talked about it, I looked at the registration sheet on the desk in front of her and noticed her name. Normally I would look at the first name only, assuming I wouldn't remember the last name anyway. In this case though, I made sure to look at her last name.

When I taught on Standing Rock, I learned to pay more attention to names than I had before in my life. I had been raised in suburbs of large cities, and never with relatives nearby. I never assumed that anyone I met might have a familial connection to anyone

else that I met, unless perhaps they shared the last name, attended the same school, and also looked alike. In my time on Standing Rock, I recognized that people are always discussing connections between other people. When a name comes up, someone will say “Oh, that’s so-and-so’s son,” or “She married so-and-so’s nephew.” I understand this is also a phenomenon among rural communities, but having never lived in one, I associate the name-connecting practice with Standing Rock. Since Renee looked both Indigenous and Lakota, I knew that if I recognized her last name as a family name from the area where I knew people, I might be able to make a connection with her by asking whether she was related to so-and-so.

Sure enough, I looked at her last name—but then I hesitated. Fast Horse? I asked if she had been related to Mike Fast Horse. Mike was one of the best students I taught at Sitting Bull College, though I only taught him for a short time. Mike was quick, funny, a high school track star, always prepared for class. Halfway through my first semester at Sitting Bull, Mike died in a car crash in South Dakota. He was the passenger, but both he and the driver had been drinking. His funeral was the first of many I attended for young people in my short time teaching on Standing Rock.

“Yes,” Renee said. “He was my uncle.” I told her briefly how I knew Mike and what I remembered of him. She smiled. “People are always saying things like that about him,” she said. Everyone had known him because of his athletic and academic achievements. All these years later, I feel sad as I write about him. It isn’t that I knew Mike well, or for very long. On the reservation, there was a weekly and sometimes daily litany of people who had just died, usually tragically; I certainly would have heard of others before him. But while other funerals I attended were for people related to or

otherwise significant to people that I knew, Mike was a student in my class, and I had enjoyed knowing him. When I met Renee that day, I felt like the fabric of time and space folded back a bit, and I felt both a little sad and glad to be reminded of Mike. I hoped I would see her again in the fall, and it turned out that she had registered for my Expressive Writing class.

For the first several weeks, Renee seemed intent on being a conscientious college student. She arrived early to class, wrote for the entire time during free writing exercises, and wrote even more for her first assigned paper than was required. She seemed shy with me and other students at the beginning of the semester, a perception I got from fleeting eye contact and her soft voice. But for most of the last half of the semester, I noticed her frequently in conversation with others in the class. When she spoke with me, her voice was strong, she smiled often, and eye contact was steady and sure. Renee continued to perform well in class, though she tended to arrive late often during the last half of the semester.

However, there was a period of several weeks during the second month of the semester when Renee seemed to be struggling. Her skin looked dull, her brow was furrowed as if she were worried, and she only seemed to smile when she was nervous. She looked at the paper in front of her more often than she looked at me in the front of the room, or glanced at anyone else. Renee never told me about anything that might have been bothering her during this time, or if indeed anything was. When I asked after class one day how she was doing, she said she was fine. I commented that she looked like she might be struggling with something or perhaps just tired, and she said she was not getting

enough sleep. It was during this time that Renee wrote the “This I Believe” paper, which discuss at length in chapter four of this project.

Renee may have been experiencing normal adjustment issues for a first year college student living away from home for the first time, and those normal issues may have been exacerbated by cultural conflicts. It is also possible that Renee was having so much fun in the dorms that she was giving up sleep to make memories with new friends. She didn’t say. But Renee did seem to rally emotionally, and she finished the semester well, having turned in all of her assignments on time, as well as the required revisions.

The next semester, I saw Renee occasionally in the hallways of the program building, and she always smiled and made eye contact; she said hello and always said she was doing fine. Near the end of spring semester, I believed her less, because once again, I saw the furrowed brow and brief glances instead of sustained eye contact. When I asked her about it, she said she was overwhelmed with assignments and tests. Most of the time when I saw her, though, she was rushing to class and didn’t have time to chat.

Near the end of Spring 2010, I made appointments with all the students in my study for follow-up interviews. Renee set up a time to meet with me, but she did not show up for the appointment. I saw her in the hallway a few days later, and she apologized and set up another appointment. Renee did not show up for that appointment, either. I did not know if she was having trouble managing her time and schedule, or if she was avoiding coming in to interview with me again. I had no reason to think that was the case, but participants in my study had the right to withdraw from the study at any time, and I did not want to pressure her to continue. For that reason, I did not press Renee again for a follow-up interview.

Renee completed her first year successfully, and returned to State U for a second year. I have spoken with her informally, and I know that she has struggled somewhat academically. Renee experienced some family stress during fall 2010, which she did not specify, and as a result she was on academic probation. However, when I saw her last in fall 2010, she said she was enrolled for a full course load during spring 2011, and feeling confident that she would handle it well.

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